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HOPE--THE QUEST FOR LIBERATION  
"A DISCUSSION OF THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS  
OF THE LIVES, ACTIVITIES AND MESSAGES OF  
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND MALCOLM X

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the School of Theology  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Religion

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by  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of civilization great epochs have taken place. These epochs have at times been intensely involved with one particular area of man's concern over against another area of his concern. Thus, the epochs have been oriented tribally, politically, philosophically, theologically, and in other ways which are common to human experience.

On the one hand there are some well defined periods and chronologies which make it possible to distinguish between epochal periods. And on the other hand there are some epochs which seem to have no clearly distinct time period. These epochs would best be characterized as master epochs.

One such master epoch has been the brutish, solitary, nasty, sometimes beautiful and unique experience of Black people in America, more specifically the United States of America.

It is not enough to talk solely about the experiences of Black people in America, especially since there is a plethora of literature available and easily accessible to anyone desiring to know about this experience. However, it is absolutely necessary to seek to discover what kind of preachment, what source of strength, what types of leadership, and what spiritual motivation help to give a totally oppressed people the desire, the courage and the hope to fight on to a brighter destiny. The question is, what unique composite of events creates the

insatiable appetite for liberation?

There is probably no precise formula for obtaining answers to these questions. But it appears that one way to get at this is to analyze and compare the content of the messages, and the actions of those persons or leaders who were able to catch the ear of the vast majority of these oppressed people. Even if it is not possible to document their being heard by a vast majority, it can be easily documented that their messages have had great impact on the thoughts, actions and in fact the lives of these people. The impact may be viewed as either negative or positive.

Two well known but diversely oriented twentieth-century Black men have accomplished the kind of recognition referred to above. Their messages have been widely disseminated. Their actions have been documented. Their preachments and actions have been glorified in some circles and condemned in others. For the purpose of this study these persons will be viewed as liberators.

These persons are not only diverse personalities, they are of somewhat diverse origin and background, and their methods and actions are diverse. The spiritual and religious content of their lives is seemingly very dissimilar. If a theology were to be attributed to them individually, it would probably be two theologies on one pole. However, it is rather obvious that these men must be viewed as liberators of their people, but a broad and objective view of them would probably bring about the conclusive statement that they are liberators of all men. It may be more accurate to say that they saw liberation for Black

men as liberation for all men. Their concern was for humanity universally.

I am aware that my choice of persons is an arbitrary one, but I hope to prove that it is a meaningful choice. I pray that this study of these persons will reveal to us how radically different messages and actions provoke a common hope and strength which has helped an oppressed people to endure and at the same time seek to overcome their oppression.

The persons I have chosen are Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Except for the chronological order of their appearance on the stage of life, I have no particular reason to place them in any particular order. But as this study emerges I may be compelled to reassert definitively and concretely the necessity of such ordering.

This study intends to present a theology, specifically a theology which has not been lifted up as a basis for action in the Black experience. It is hoped that on the one hand we will be able to identify such a theology and on the other hand that such identification will allow us to systematize out of it a Black Theology. In addition, there may emerge something so unique in this theology that it is of universal significance.

The Black Theology developed out of this study will be compared with Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope. For it is out of this comparative study that Black Theology's universal significance may be understood.

Liberators, liberation and hope are the primary themes of this study and the persons whom I have chosen as classic figures to study,

serve to give efficacy to the symbolic language which is needed to express these concepts.

It becomes immediately clear that prior to speaking about liberators one must talk about liberation. Once we speak of liberation we are first expected to define our use of this term, and to next place its usage into some or any meaningful perspective. In pure simplistic dictionary form liberation is defined as "the act of releasing from restraint or bondage."<sup>1</sup> This definition does not deal with the enormous implications and ramifications involved in the meaning of this term.

Sociologically, psychologically, philosophically and/or theologically we find that there is much more to be said about liberation than this brief simplistic dictionary definition reveals. This is not meant to be an indictment of dictionary definitions, to the contrary, it merely demonstrates our overwhelming need for focal perspectives.

Sociologically speaking, one might characterize liberation as the releasing from the bondage of persons or a society of persons, another person or group of persons. This could be physical or mental bondage or both. Psychologically speaking, one may be considered liberated when he is able to realize himself as a being among other beings, all of them experiencing their own human potentials and accepting the same. This kind of knowledge has been described as liberating. Thus possession of same can be thought of as psychologically liberating.

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<sup>1</sup>*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 484.

Philosophically speaking, liberation may be understood as man's release to the state of freedom in which he can will for himself as a human whatever he chooses. Theologically speaking, liberation is man's release from himself to the point of transcendence or to the point of at oneness with God and with man. With man as the "thou" which gives the "I" hope and security as well as a feeling of liberation.

The manner in which I wish to discuss liberation in this study is really a composite of all of the above with more added. The more is the impact and the urgency of liberation as the only living option to which oppressed men should submit their total existence.

Thus, I am saying that if a man is in bondage or in any form of restraint apart from criminal justice fairly applied and issued by the whole of society, meaning its representative bodies, he is oppressed. To be oppressed has no relation to liberation unless one becomes aware of his oppression and decides he no longer is able to accept it passively. The immediate question is, what does one do when he becomes aware and is no longer able to accept his oppression passively? Camus says he rebels. In part one of *The Rebel*, Albert Camus, talks about the rebel; what he is, why he is, and how he operates. Camus describes the rebel as a slave or an oppressed person who has made a decision about his own state of being. For Camus a rebel is "a man who says no . . ."<sup>2</sup> This no is of extreme importance, as we shall see as Camus continues on by

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<sup>2</sup>Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 13.



explaining what the rebel means when he says no. "He means, for example, that 'this has been going on too long,' 'up to this point yes, beyond it no,' 'you are going too far,' or again, 'there is a limit beyond which you shall not go.'" <sup>3</sup> It is this initial no that activates the individual's push toward liberation.

There are other questions which must be answered as to why the individual feels moved to rebel or to seek liberation at this particular "no." One may ask: Why had the rebel waited so long? What created this feeling that he must no longer endure his oppression? Is he willing to die seeking his liberation? Is his cause of importance to more persons than just himself? Camus deals with most of these questions, and his answers may help the reader to understand why I contend that when the oppressed person says "no" to his present status he is commencing his quest for liberation.

Why does one who is oppressed wait so long before he seeks to do something about it? Camus contends that when the rebel says "no" he gains a certain sudden awareness and that "no matter how confused it may be," this awareness, "develops from the very act of rebellion. . . ," the rebel gains the "perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself, even if only for a moment." <sup>4</sup> Thus he has suddenly become aware of his rights as a man among men and refuses to accept his present state of oppression. One might view this as a conversion experience of sorts. It may be better viewed as John Cobb's

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

"threshold" experience as explained in his book, *The Structure of Christian Existence*.<sup>5</sup>

This "threshold" experience places the oppressed in another vista of life and he is compelled to reject enduring his oppression. "The very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery."<sup>6</sup> In the language of this study, the very moment the oppressed refuses to obey the orders of his oppressor, he rejects the condition of oppression. "The part of himself that he wanted to be respected he proceeds to place above everything else and proclaims it preferable to everything, even to life itself."<sup>7</sup> The oppressed person or the slave as Camus refers to him, has "up to now been willing to compromise, . . ." He "suddenly adopts ('because this is how it must be . . .') an attitude of all or nothing . . ."<sup>8</sup> To be sure, we find he is willing to die seeking his liberation, because as Camus states,

The rebel himself wants to be 'all'--to identify himself completely with this good of which he has suddenly become aware and by which he wants to be personally recognized and acknowledge--or 'nothing'; in other words, to be completely destroyed by the force that dominates him. As a last resort he is willing to accept the final defeat, which is death, rather than be deprived of the personal sacrament that he would call, for example freedom. Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Evidence of the slave's willingness to accept death rather than be deprived of his freedom is found in the historical reports on slavery as experienced during that period in this nation. Several such accounts are reported in a book edited by Joanne Grant. The book is entitled *Black Protest*. There are excerpts from an article written by Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," included in this book.<sup>10</sup>

In their article they refer to a few incidences out of many which illustrate the refusal of slaves to accept their brutal, nasty conditions, and in fact make evident their willingness to die.

The strength of Negro resistance to slavery becomes apparent in the extent to which the slaves mutilated themselves in their efforts to escape work. A girl on Lewis' plantation who had been injured tied pack thread around her wounds when they started to heal and then rubbed dirt in them. In her anxiety to avoid work she gave herself a very serious infection. But this action was mild compared to that of others.<sup>11</sup>

General Leslie Coombs, of Lexington, owned a man named Ennis, a house carpenter. He had bargained with a slave-trader to take him and carry him down the river. Ennis was determined not to go. He took a broad axe and cut one hand off, then contrived to lift the axe, with his arm pressing to his body, and let it fall upon the other, cutting off the ends of the fingers.<sup>12</sup>

The rebel, the slave, the oppressed person ultimately makes the decision that there is something in living that is worth dying for. When the oppressed person reaches this decision his object for living

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond A. and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," in Joanne Grant (ed.) *Black Protest* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1968), p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

transcends him and becomes the cause of all humanity.

The transcendent cause or motivator becomes liberation itself. That is, liberation from the state of oppression with which the oppressed has decided he no longer can live. I like the way Camus expresses this. He says, "It is for the sake of everyone in the world that the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something in him which does not belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all men--even the man who insults and oppresses him--have a natural community."<sup>13</sup>

It is significant that Camus reaches the conclusion revealed in the last part of the statement above. For it implies that liberation for the oppressed brings about liberation for the unoppressed or the oppressor. Unfortunately the oppressor often is not aware of his need to be liberated. That is, he is not aware that he is saying yes to human indignity which limits him in his capacity to be human. For his oppressive actions are denying him his fullest potential and his fullest freedom as a human being. Thus, liberation in its fullest sense removes the burden of oppression for the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

Liberation is not something which occurs like a natural phenomenon. Liberation may be desired sort of like a natural phenomenon, however, the movement in the direction of liberation usually demands two specific ingredients. First, there must be a person or persons who are victims of oppression. Thus, we must first have oppression. Secondly,

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<sup>13</sup>Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

there must be someone who will accept the responsibility of making these persons aware that they have something to die for in order to gain life. There must be someone or a number of someones who can help to elevate the pain of the past and present to such a state that the oppressed will say a collective "No." There must be someone who is willing to demonstrate his willingness to risk all, including his life, in order to give efficacy to the common cause for which they seek liberation. Finally, there must be someone who can present a view of the future in such a manner that it will give people the hope and the will to endure the present and fight on, no matter what the cost, to make that hope a reality.

The person referred to above is known as a liberator. The liberator is one who comes with a message and a plan. Even prior to this the liberator has a hope which roots him solidly in the present and the future. The liberator knows that his cause is just before God as well as man. He knows because he is thoroughly grounded in his own self-understanding. The liberator is a victim of the same common experience from which he seeks liberation. However, he comes with a plan of action which resonates with large segments of the constituents for which he seeks liberation. The oppressed see in *this* plan their hope for the future. Eric Hoffer with whom this writer disagrees, at many points, makes statements which allude to how mass movements come about. At this point, they are cogent to this study. He writes in his book, *The True Believer*, "Those who would transform a nation or the world cannot do so by breeding and captaining discontent or by demonstrating the

reasonableness and desirability of the intended changes or by coercing people into a new way of life. They must know how to kindle and fan an extravagant hope."<sup>14</sup>

For the oppressed what is a more extravagant hope than that of freedom and equality. Likewise for the unoppressed and/or the oppressor who witnesses and enforces this oppression, it too is an extravagant hope viewed negatively.

The two persons referred to in this study as liberators preached a message of hope. Compared to their then present reality and that of the masses to whom they spoke and by whom they were received, theirs was in some way a message of extravagant hope.

An examination of their liberating activity implies that they were aware of some kind of hope. This hope had different rules and at some points different kinds of expression for each of them.

On the one hand, Martin Luther King's hope was rooted in the Christian understanding of a better kingdom soon to come, and his tactic was to push for this kingdom through non-violent direct action. King was sure that God would aid in the ushering in of the kingdom of which he spoke. On the other hand, Malcolm X's basis for hope was the religiously inspired need to root out the evils of white oppression through whatever means necessary.

Certainly these expressions of some kind of hope are tied to the same pole, and are related to the same cause; racism and oppression of

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<sup>14</sup>Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: New American Library, 1951), p. 18.

Black people in America. However, at this point they serve only to point to a future discussion of these liberators' points of view, mode of operation, and their approach to liberation.

If these liberators were able to present some view of hope which precipitated action on the part of great masses of the Black population of this nation, it is safe to project that in some way hope is related to action. The question then, is, if hope is related to action, how is it so related?

Prior to answering the question as to how hope is related to action, we should look at several definitions of hope. These definitions should help to clarify a starting point as to what we mean when we say hope is related to action.

In his book *Images of Hope*, William F. Lynch defines hope in several ways. Initially he defines hope as "the fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of difficulty, that things can work out, that we as human persons can somehow handle and manage internal and external reality . . ."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to explain what he means by this: "What we are really saying is that hope is, in its most general terms a sense of the possible, that what we really need is possible, though difficult . . ."<sup>16</sup>

It is within this general definition that all subsequent

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<sup>15</sup>William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

discussion of hope, as it evolves in this study, will somehow function. In other words, I do understand hope in the extravagant utopian sense, and I do not desire to project this idea in any way. As Lynch maintains, hope "involves three basic ideas that could not be simpler: What I hope for I do not yet have or see; it may be difficult; but I *can* have it . . . it is possible."<sup>17</sup>

A second definition of hope comes to us from C. F. D. Moule's book, *The Meaning of Hope*. At one point he refers to hope as " . . . a confident expectation regarding something not present but believed to be really coming . . ."<sup>18</sup> Primarily Moule is concerned about hope in a Biblical sense. So even though he gives the above as one of his definitions for hope he immediately says that this " . . . is not the sense most characteristic of the Bible."<sup>19</sup>

The hope which is characteristic of the Bible is that hope which is tied up with faith, obedience, covenant, revelation, God as revealed in Christ, Resurrection, past history, present history, future history and an entire network of theological postulations which make sense of the present and lend to interpretation of the future. Jürgen Moltmann's book *Theology of Hope*, expresses the idea that "promise" is the touchstone of Christian hope. He says as he discusses the relationship of

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1953), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*



Jesus to Easter, to the Resurrection and to Revelation:

Jesus is recognized in the Easter appearances as what he really *will be*. The 'vital point' for a Christian view of revelation accordingly lies neither in 'that which came to express in the man Jesus' (Ebeling) nor in the 'destiny of Jesus' (Pannenberg) but--combining both of these--in the fact that in all the qualitative difference of cross and resurrection Jesus is the same. This identity in infinite contradiction is theologically understood as an event of identification, an act of the faithfulness of God. It is this that forms the ground of the promise of the still outstanding future of Jesus Christ. It is this that is the ground of the hope which carries faith through the trials of the God-forsaken world and of death.<sup>20</sup>

I am here merely alluding to one of Moltmann's discussions on hope. In a later chapter I shall endeavor to give a view of his discussion of hope as it relates to the entire study.

Through his definition of hope Lynch indicates that action and hope are inextricably related, for he quotes St. Paul in saying that "We live by hope."<sup>21</sup> Lynch goes on to say that "we can interpret this as meaning that everything we do in life is based on the hope that doing will get us somewhere, though sometimes we do not know where."<sup>22</sup> Lynch very simplistically gives the example that "we will not get out of the bed in the morning unless there is hope."<sup>23</sup> Here we can see even in a very commonplace situation that action is ultimately related intimately to some form of hope.

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<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Moltmann relates hope and action in the following statement:

If one hopes for the sake of Christ in the future of God and the ultimate liberation of the world, he cannot passively wait for this future and, like the apocalyptic believers withdraw from the world. Rather, he must seek this future, strive for it, and already be in correspondence to it in the active renewal of life and of the conditions of life and therefore realize it already here according to the measure of possibilities.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, Moltmann is convinced that hope and more specifically, Christian hope demands some kind of action.

We can now conclude that the liberator feels his cause is just, his actions are justifiable, and that it is his responsibility to give the masses to whom he speaks a message which brings about a hope which in turn motivates action. We can conclude that through his message of hope the liberator is able to touch the common longings of the hearts of those who are oppressed, to such an extent that they too are willing to take the risk of faith in that hope.

Much of the previous discussion was presented in the abstract. That is, there was little particular reference to particular situations as they relate to the real substantive material to be covered in this study. Now we shall begin to deal with particularities.

Black people in the United States of America have been seeking liberation from their oppression ever since oppression, and, more specifically, white oppression was imposed upon them. There have been many attempts to use various modes of action to relieve much of said

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<sup>24</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 218.

oppression. Some attempts worked for a while and some never worked. Black people have sought liberation through military action, small scale though it was. Such rebellions as the now famous Nat Turner rebellion, the John Brown raid, and Denmark Vesey's attempts at rebellion are evidence of the early futilistic small scale attempts at military action. Liberation has been sought through political action, but history reveals that Black liberation as it pertains to politics has always been stifled by the game of political football which is played by all legislative bodies, and parties to these bodies both North and South, liberal, moderate, and conservative. Liberation has been sought through our system of justice, namely the courts, and until recently, little has been accomplished. The most significant event to take place in the courts was the Supreme Court decision to integrate the schools of our nation, and as of yet this has only been summarily accomplished. Most of what has been accomplished has taken place in the federal courts. Liberation for the Black man in the form of equal justice is still a reality of the future as it applies to the local courts.

Liberation has been attempted through the formation of social action groups such as the NAACP, Urban League, CORE, SNCC, and many others too numerous to mention. Blacks have sought liberation from white oppression through the trade union movement and found that the same white oppressors with their bigoted and racist attitudes are not willing to relinquish or share their power with Blacks.

The only place where Blacks have been able to make virtually

unrestrained steps toward liberation has been in the sphere of religion and the religious establishment. That religious establishment which has for the most part been owned and run by Black people. The accent on religion has more or less dominated the lives of Black people in this country. It has been through this mode of self-expression that Black people have been able to experience a genesis of liberation which to a great extent has been permanent. I refer to Christianity in its many forms as it has been subscribed to and appropriated by Black people ever since they came into contact with it. And as well, I am referring to those forms of religious cults and quasi-religious groups that have been endemic to the Black communities across this nation.

Suffice it to say, some of these brands of religion have been spiritually liberating and have motivated persons to seek total liberation from white oppression. Other brands of religion have been spiritually uplifting, and disabling in every other way. Others have helped us survive the present and press on toward a brighter future.

The liberators to whom I refer have come out of one or the other of these religious traditions. Their ethics, moral philosophy, theology and actions were shaped by their exposure or non-exposure to these various traditions. To be sure, each of them witnessed to a mandate which compelled them to act.

It is our task to define that mandate in theological terms, as we view their actions, and at the same time seek to realize the motivation for their actions. Thus, we can conclude decisively that our working definition of theology is, the community in reflection upon

itself.

It would be inappropriate for me to conclude unreservedly that either of these men worked solely and consciously from a theological stance. However, it is clear that as we look at them we can pull out a theology which was the underlying rational for their liberating activities as well as their strong hope for liberation. Thus my task is before me as I seek to complete this study.

## CHAPTER II

### MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND CHRISTIAN HOPE

This portion of study dealing with Martin Luther King, Jr. is by no means intended to be a biography of his life. The intent is to take a critical look at the man, his ideas, and his actions. Looking at him in this way helps to determine the basis of his hope, and indeed it is Christian hope. We should also reach conclusions regarding his message, which moved people to act. Such conclusions might range from his style, his means of delivery, the means he proposed for accomplishment of his goals, as well as the promise in his message.

Looking at the life of an individual like Dr. King, one finds it necessary to look at the environment which molded and shaped him. I refer not just to the home environment, but to the political, social, economic and psychological environment which impinged upon him and helped to shape his philosophy, values, actions and theology. Above all, it is necessary to concern ourselves with the conditions of his birth and his life at home as a child.

Let us begin with the simple historical fact, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>1</sup> Being born a Negro meant there was something unique, and totally unfathomable to the history of his forbearers who had been brought to this country and

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<sup>1</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., *What Manner of Man* (New York: Pocket, 1964), p. 4.

enslaved in the worst and most dehumanizing system ever foisted upon mankind. That system, based upon economic gain, made the slave an object less than human.

King's birth into this heritage made it a certainty that during his life, at some time or other, he would have to reckon with this legacy of the past in seeking to deal with his present and future.

He was born into the home and parentage of respected middle-class Atlanta Negroes. His father was a college educated Baptist preacher, and his mother was a former teacher, the daughter of A. D. Williams, one of the outstanding pastors in the city of Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> Williams pastored the Ebenezer Baptist Church. This church played a major role in the childhood and later development of King, Jr. King's father, Martin, Sr., became assistant pastor early in King's childhood.<sup>3</sup> Upon the death of his father-in-law in 1931, King, Sr. became pastor of Ebenezer.

According to Bennett, in his *What Manner of Man*, A. D. Williams and his son-in-law " . . . were among pioneer leaders of the modern Negro resistance movement which grew out of and reflected the violent struggles of slave rebels like Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner, . . ."<sup>4</sup> This reflection reveals King as the product of that kind of leadership which "stressed lyrical and somewhat effulgent oratory and a cautious 'realistic' approach to the problems of a racial minority which lacked absolute initiative vis-a-vis their oppressors and had to attack,

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

therefore with tact and caution."<sup>5</sup> The following should help to give a clearer picture of the psychological climate in Atlanta before King's birth, and at the same time, lends an understanding of King's leadership heritage.

Crucial to an understanding of the leadership heritage Martin Luther King, Jr., inherited--and expanded--is understanding not of love but of a brute fact of power: Minority status maintained by the implacable will of a majority which controlled--and controls--*all* the lines of force. Faced with this brute fact--powerlessness vs. power--Negro leaders have expressed themselves in two dominant patterns: protest and activism. Protest is an *attitude* of non-acceptance based on sustained contention via political and legal tactics *within* the system. Activism, on the other hand, is a program of direct action based on *revolt* on the edges of or outside the system. To the right of these patterns of resistance are programs of accommodation (acceptance of the system and the proving of self and race by accumulation, good works, and good behavior), black nationalism (separation from the system), and interracial conciliation (goodwill efforts to effect gradual changes in the system by education, research, exposure, persuasion, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we find King born into a history which would and did have its influence on his life and thought.

There are many incidents in the life of King which, upon reflection, seem to have greatly influenced his feelings about life in this society.

King was brought up in what Bennett refers to as a "Black Puritan Class" family<sup>7</sup>--membership in the "ruling elite" of Atlanta's Negro community.<sup>8</sup> They lived in lovely homes in the all-Negro section and they believed along with everyone else in their leadership class,

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*



" . . . that a Negro could 'make it,' if he studied hard, worked hard, and stayed out of trouble. And what was trouble? Trouble was a palpable presence called the white man."<sup>9</sup>

A brief look at King's childhood confirms that he " . . . was a healthy, vital, fun-loving male with many playmates, most of whom he dominated by will power and an instinctive gift of words."<sup>10</sup> His obsession for words obviously developed at a very young age, for Bennett tells of the time when King was six years old and informed his mother, 'You just wait and see . . . I'm going to get me some *big* words.' So, at a very young age, he was learning the power of words. Psychologists might say he was learning the manipulative power of words. However, if we allow this we must hasten to add manipulative in an objectively positive sense.

King's early childhood was something of a confused contradiction of order and ambivalence. Several events which took place early in his life are illustrative of this order and ambivalence. In the first place, he was brought up in a home situation where he was expected to follow an orderly pattern of existence. Bennett remarks that King's childhood was one " . . . marked by order, balance, and restraint. Sunday School and church on Sunday, playtime in or near the house on weekdays, an afternoon job throwing papers (not necessarily for money but for *discipline* and training), early to bed, early to rise. Days began and ended in the King home with family prayers, . . ."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

Evidence of his ambivalence and contradiction showed early in his life. As one author put it, King was a man of "considerable complexity."<sup>12</sup> The following incidents demonstrate this complexity. King attempted to commit suicide twice before his thirteenth birthday. The first attempt followed his grandmother's accident of being knocked unconscious. King, reportedly thought she was dead, so he went upstairs and jumped from a second story window without suffering injury. Again in 1941, when his grandmother died, he once again jumped from the second story window, however, he survived.<sup>13</sup> I'm not sure whether we should refer to this as strong love or strong determination, but I do know it reflects ambivalence, contradiction and complexity in a life which was seemingly well-disciplined.

King discovered early in life that being a Negro conveyed to whites and Blacks in America a meaning altogether different from all else that life afforded one. It meant, he discovered with the help of his mother, that he must learn he was " . . . as good as anyone else . . ."<sup>14</sup>

In this way King's life was no different from any other Black child brought up in America. That is, he found out at an early age that to be Black in America meant denial, oppression, and rejection. At the same time, however, he was bolstered by his parents to cultivate pride in his blackness and that it meant as much as whiteness, perhaps more. Even with these lessons of courage and strength, King never

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

really coped with all the realities of such experiences when so confronted. These experiences were to live in the heart and soul of King for years to come.

King was considered a very good student all the way through school. He started his education in public school. Subsequently he attended University School, a private elementary institution on the campus of Atlanta University.<sup>15</sup> Upon completion, he entered the public high school in Atlanta and was immediately skipped from the ninth to the tenth grade.<sup>16</sup> He took college entrance exams and passed them, so he skipped out of high school right into college. Spending only two years in high school, he finished high school at the age of fifteen, a very young age.<sup>17</sup> He enrolled in Morehouse College, an all-Negro men's college located in Atlanta, noted for its building of men and building successful professionals.<sup>18</sup> The eminently known Dr. Benjamin Mays was president at that time and he reports that King was a wise young man, far beyond his years.<sup>19</sup>

Though King was raised in the home of a minister, he had expressed no desire to go into the ministry. As a matter of fact, he was against the idea because he did not like the manifestations of the church as he knew it.<sup>20</sup> He felt that the singing, the shouting, the emotionalism, was not a real expression of his religious concern.<sup>21</sup> He

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

saw this as anti-intellectual. To be sure, King was going to become a doctor or a lawyer. He majored in sociology with the intention of becoming a lawyer so he could help his people overcome their oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Though no mention has been made of it, King was good with oratory and, as a matter of fact, he had all along the way sharpened his tools of oratory in the church and at school.<sup>23</sup> In Negro society these are two places which provide opportunity for one to improve his skills in oratory. Bennett reports that King had found he could *move* audiences with his oratory. So it seems that even though King had indicated his disgust for the ministry, he actually spent his early life preparing for it.

It was while a student of Morehouse that King wrestled with the decision of his life's vocation. It seems that he always had this deep desire to enter the ministry but he was slow to decide because of what he had seen as representative of trained and untrained ministers.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to this conscience feeling, he was very much impressed with two well-trained ministers with whom he came into contact while he was in college--Dr. Benjamin Mays and Dr. George Kelsey.<sup>25</sup> After hearing these two men preach and coming under their powerful influence, King decided he could no longer resist the inevitable. He thus entered the ministry in his junior year at Morehouse.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.    <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

He was ordained and appointed assistant minister at his father's church, Ebenezer Baptist, and served there until his graduation in 1944.<sup>27</sup>

King left Atlanta and went to Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, September, 1948.<sup>28</sup> It was while at Crozer that King began to caste and recaste his ideas into a mold compatible to his life style. Simultaneously, other events were taking place in America which would capture the minds' eye of this brilliant student of man.

First, we must remember that this was just three years after World War II and men the world over were becoming more aware of their right to be free. As "All over the world now, in India, in Africa, in America, Brown, Black and Yellow men were pushing their heads above the water and Europeans, feeling themselves watched, weighed, *judged* were retreating in perplexity and anxiety."<sup>29</sup> King was very aware of the plight which our Black servicemen faced and were subjected to in a segregated army.<sup>30</sup> This was the period when President Truman waged his Civil Rights fight on Capitol Hill.<sup>31</sup> So we see, all around King there was brewing a change in the attitudes of oppressed peoples. Our men had fought and died in a foreign war, so naturally, Blacks would see this as one more concrete step toward much desired and deserved freedom. It was this kind of world psychological environment in which King was maturing.

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

King was an excellent student while at Crozer. He was one of six Negroes out of a student body of one hundred.<sup>32</sup> There is no doubt that there was tremendous pressure on all six, pressure which demanded that they prove themselves as good or better students than their peers. King achieved this with overwhelming results finishing Crozer with an A average for the three-year course of study.<sup>33</sup>

We must remember that it was in this environment that King sought to test his ideas and delved into ways to eliminate social evil.<sup>34</sup> He was most pleased with and impressed by the ideas of Hegel. For him, Hegel's " . . . analysis of the dialectical process and of progress and growth through pain became central elements in his emerging personal philosophy."<sup>35</sup> King was also " . . . impressed by Hegel's theory that 'world-historical individuals' were the agents by which 'the will of the world spirit' is carried out."<sup>36</sup>

Another writer who is said to have influenced King's thoughts was Walter Rauschenbusch. King read *Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis*. He said this book "left an indelible imprint on my thinking."<sup>37</sup> The parts of Rauschenbusch's philosophy which had meaning for King were those parts which dealt with the "great preacher's application of the social principles of Jesus to the problems of the modern world."<sup>38</sup> To be sure, it was from this point that King developed his

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

ideas " . . . that the church should take a direct active role in the struggle for social justice . . ."<sup>39</sup>

While in seminary King also became " . . . exposed to non-violence as a technique and Gandhi as a prophet."<sup>40</sup> The details of his exposure go something like this. In 1950, during his senior year in seminary, there was a lecture on campus by A. J. Muste, " . . . A Christian rebel who championed a non-violent approach as the leading light of the fellowship of Reconciliation, a predominately white pacifist group."<sup>41</sup> It seems that King was not greatly impressed by this lecture, but at least it was his first exposure to the Gandhian version of non-violence.

However, at a later date, he heard a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, President of Howard University. Johnson had recently returned from India and was obviously convinced " . . . that Gandhi's tactics were applicable to the race struggle in America."<sup>42</sup> King was so impressed with Dr. Johnson's enthusiasm that he went right out and bought several books on Gandhi's life.<sup>43</sup> To be sure, King was impressed with Gandhi's approach to gaining freedom. Bennett does a good job of explicating Gandhi's approach:

During this period Gandhi employed a variety of techniques, fasts, general strikes, boycotts, mass marches, and massive civil disobedience. The key to his vision of battle, however, was non-resistance or *Satyagraha* which has been translated as soul force,

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<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

the power of truth. *Satyagraha*, Gandhi wrote, 'is the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self.' Throughout the long contest with Britain, Gandhi urged his followers to forswear violence and to work for ultimate reconciliation with their opponents by returning good for evil and by openly breaking unjust laws and willingly paying the penalty. 'Rivers of blood,' he said in a quote King would later repeat, almost word for word, 'may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood.'

Suffering and self-sacrifice were at the heart of Gandhi's philosophy. 'The government of the day,' he said, 'has passed a law which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If by using violence I force the government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be called body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for the breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self . . .'<sup>44</sup>

King absorbed much of this, but he was not sure that it would work in America, because in India it was the " . . . majority against a minority," and as well the racial problem in America was far more intense than was the British-Indian relations.<sup>45</sup>

King finished Crozer Theological Seminary in June, 1951, as the most outstanding student in his class and was also president of his senior class.<sup>46</sup> In the fall of 1951, King entered Boston University as a graduate student in theology and philosophy. King chose Boston University because this school was " . . . a germinal center" of the philosophy of personalism which by that time was King's philosophical posture.<sup>47</sup> This "philosophy holds that personality is the key to the meaning of the universe and that not only man, but also God is, as King puts it, 'supremely personal.'"<sup>48</sup> King studied under Edgar S. Brightman

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*



and L. Harold DeWolf. At that time they were " . . . two of the leading exponents of personal idealism or personalism."<sup>49</sup>

To be sure, King's thinking was greatly stimulated by both of these men. In this regard King said:

It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy--the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality--finite and infinite--is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions. It gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.<sup>50</sup>

King started work on his dissertation after completion of his course requirements. The subject of his dissertation was "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman."<sup>51</sup> He was writing in reaction to both of their ideas and he disagreed with both of them.<sup>52</sup>

While completing his course work at Boston, King met and married Coretta Scott, a daughter of the South and a music major at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music.<sup>53</sup> They were married June 18, 1953, in Heiberger, Alabama.<sup>54</sup> The story of their meeting and courtship is beautiful, but I only allude to it here. Meeting on a blind date, he told her she was the kind of woman he would like to marry.<sup>55</sup> They courted from February, 1952, to June, 1953. He was certain she was the

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36.

woman for him and Coretta felt as if their marriage was pre-ordained by God.<sup>56</sup>

By the end of 1953, King was through with all of his course work and had only to write his dissertation. Thus, he was looking around for a place to begin his life's work. Obviously, he had several choices of places. He could either teach in college, pastor a church in the North, or go South and pastor Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>57</sup> He chose Montgomery--the first capitol of the Confederacy.<sup>58</sup>

King's beginnings in Montgomery were rather routine, until, it seems, that the man and his date with destiny began to catch up with one another. The Montgomery story of the bus boycott has been told over and over again. Without a doubt, it was in the midst of this, the first of many episodes in his fight for the freedom of Black people in America, that King reflected on his basis for action. From this and other similar fights we can get the values, the philosophy, the ethics, and the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.

In his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King elaborates in great detail, the sequence of events which triggered the Montgomery movement. We know about the now famous Rosa Parks incident, in which she refused to move from her seat on the bus in order to allow a white man to sit down. King's reflections on this incident were somewhat philosophical,

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<sup>56</sup>Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 97.

<sup>57</sup>Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 41. <sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

but very possibly true. He wrote,

She was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the boundless aspirations of generations yet unborn. She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the *Zeitgeist*--the spirit of the time.<sup>59</sup>

If one looks closely at King's statement, he might conclude that King had a keen sense of the forces of history upon the times, and an awareness of the metaphysical implications of what seems to be inevitability.

King's feeling that the *Zeitgeist* had tracked Rosa Parks down, is a powerful interpretation of this unfathomable act. However, what King failed to say and Bennett says it for him, was " . . . the *Zeitgeist* was really seeking King."<sup>60</sup> Bennett quite adroitly illuminates this idea with the following explanation:

'Tracked down' and 'chosen' by the times, King transcended the occasion, changing the times and transforming a diffuse uprising into a mass movement with passion and purpose. As a catalytic agent, he created a revolutionary point of departure, a new tissue of aspirations and demands. As a magnet and exemplar-myth, as an invitation to a new way of life, King attracted and released the energies of men and women of varying view points.<sup>61</sup>

When we examine the Montgomery incident we probably begin to wonder what was it that allowed King to create such a mood in the hearts and minds of those oppressed people to the extent that they were motivated to actions far beyond their past capacities? My question is: What was the seed of King's message that was so mobilizing for Black folk and, could it be that the psychological climate was just right for King's message?

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Racial tension was just below the surface throughout our entire country. The time had not long past since the Supreme Court had rendered the school desegregation decision. To be sure, this decision had given new hope to Black people all over America. That hope needed building on and apparently King was the person chosen by the *Zeitgeist* to accomplish this. In my estimation, the most logical answer to the above question is that King was able to employ very basic value statements with which these people were able to resonate. He was able to express his philosophical and theological justification for such values in a way that made his and their purpose indefensible as well as legitimate. For example, King's very basic application of values, whether spoken or implied, was that the system of segregation was evil and produced a "false sense of inferiority." The ethical demand for King was that this system should be resisted because it was so evil, and thus, should no longer be tolerated.<sup>62</sup>

King's philosophical and somewhat theological justification for his actions is best described by him:

Something began to say to me, 'He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.' When oppressed people willingly accept their oppression they only serve to give the oppressor a convenient justification for his acts, often the oppressor goes along unaware of the evil involved in his oppression so long as the oppressed accepts it. So in order to be true to one's conscience and true to God, a righteous man has no alternative but to refuse to cooperate with an evil system.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Ballantine, 1958), p. 41.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

King was able to get this idea across to the many people who were taking part and supporting the Montgomery movement. However, I do not feel that this completely answers my prior question as to the "seed of King's message" and its mobilizing or motivating effect. The seed of King's message which was so effective was the grounding of the protest in the love ethic. In the first mass meeting of the boycott, he implored the people saying:

Love must be our regulating ideal. Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you' . . . If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love . . . this is our challenge and our responsibility.<sup>64</sup>

King was very much aware of his people's religious background; he knew they could resonate with this kind of theology. However, it was so eternally meaningful to these people at this time because it gave validity and authenticity to their protest.

The Montgomery movement was a learning experience for King, especially as it relates to the indigenous religious expressions of Black people. Early in his life, King had rejected the emotionalism of the Black church. However, in the midst of the movement, in the spirit of the time, he rediscovered emotionalism in the Black church as a source of strength in Black religious expression in its many forms. Bennett describes this experience as follows:

From the beginning, the Montgomery movement assumed a missionary character. The huge mass meetings, which rotated from church to church, served not only as a means of communication but also as

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<sup>64</sup>Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

a morale builder. . . . under the impact of the old Negro spirituals, of hand-clapping, shouting, 'testifying' and 'amen-ing,' personality shells dissolved and reintegrated themselves around a larger, more inclusive racial self.<sup>65</sup>

Bennett goes on to say:

The effect of these meetings on Martin Luther King was no less immediate and obvious. King had tended to look down on the 'emotionalism' of the Negro church, but now he began to see that the Negro religious tradition contained enormous reservoirs of psychic and social strength which had never been adequately tapped. And now King began to accept himself and the Negro people as history made them, never on that account relaxing the inner demand that he and they should be better. In some such manner, in a church of fire, the re-education, the metamorphosis, of Martin Luther King, Jr., began.<sup>66</sup>

The significance of the statement above is that King's appreciation of his religious heritage grew even in the midst of a movement of such magnitude. This by implication means that King was becoming better prepared to deal with the role into which he had been thrust.

Having been thrust into such a leadership role made it necessary for King to employ all his resources toward development of rules of behavior and guiding principles for the movement. In relating the story of the Montgomery movement, King pointed this out:

From the beginning a basic philosophy guided the movement. This guiding principle has since been referred to variously as non-violent resistance. But in the first days of the protest, none of these expressions was mentioned, the phrase most often heard was 'Christian Love.' It was the sermon on the mount rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that started the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> M. King, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

In addition to this, it wasn't long before King had done a magnificent job of fusing the ideas of Gandhi with Christian doctrine. He said

I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of non-violence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom.<sup>68</sup>

It was this ethical and theological guide that permeated King's entire approach to protest all throughout his life to come.

It is easy to continue to relate events out of the Montgomery movement, but my purpose is not just to deal with this movement. The intent is to illustrate and define out of several events related to King's struggle for civil rights, *his* mandate for action. This first movement brought about several significant results. Firstly, it thrust Martin Luther King, Jr., into the national limelight as the leader of Black Americans in their struggle for civil rights, human rights and dignity. Secondly, as Eric Lincoln states, referring to this movement as "The Great Walk"--

The Great Walk had destroyed a myth and shaped a new history for Black Americans. Thousands of black men and women had sacrificed convenience, security, and the 'good will' of the white folks to follow a black leader under circumstances that were uncertain, dangerous, and against established tradition and circumspection.<sup>69</sup>

Lincoln continues this idea at a later point, writing:

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> C. Eric Lincoln (ed.), *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), p. xii.

Martin Luther King demonstrated the power of black men and the vulnerability of white men and the systems which protect the white mystique of invincibility. In doing so, he set the stage for the ultimate liberation of black men by freeing them from the paralyzing self-hypnosis induced by accepting at face value the white man's stereotyped projection of the meaning of being black.<sup>70</sup>

Thirdly, King was "able to translate religious fervor into social action, thereby creating political leadership under the rubric of his religious ministry at an extraordinary level of involvement and commitment."<sup>71</sup> In Montgomery, Black people had learned a sense of unity which they had never been able to sustain over such a long period of time. Fourthly, King had beaded together--the Gandhian form of non-violent resistance and Christian love--into a chain which seemed strong and durable.

A look at King's involvement in other events of the Civil Rights struggle will help to further illuminate his ethical, moral, political, and religious beliefs and actions. In this way determination can be made as to what informed his hope, and, as well, the hope that he engendered in his people. This look will also reveal whether or not these beliefs and actions were born out of Christian hope.

King was none other than a prophet in his day. He was a prophet of justice--social justice. He was a prophet who sought to live out the meaning of his message. The strongest evidence for this observation comes out of an event which took place during the Montgomery movement.

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xiii.



King was very busy in the movement meeting and speaking in several mass meetings every night. One night while he was in attendance at one of these meetings, his house was bombed. His wife, daughter and another friend were in the house at the time; however, they were not injured.<sup>72</sup> Mrs. King had anticipated this kind of thing happening and had devised a plan of action. The plan was simple: in case of strange sounds in the front of the house she would retreat to the rear. Her plan worked and no one was injured in this first bombing. When King received word of what had taken place he did not become too alarmed. He was only somewhat concerned about the safety of his wife and child.<sup>73</sup>

By the time he arrived home that night, there was an unruly crowd of people outside his house, anxious to seek revenge. King stepped to his front porch and demonstrated through his words and his actions the essence of his message:

'Now let's not become panicky,' I continued. 'If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with non-violence. Remember the words of Jesus: "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword."' I then urged them to leave peacefully. 'We must love our white brothers,' I said, 'no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you."' 'This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love. Remember,' I ended, 'if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance.'<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>C. King, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>73</sup>M. King, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

In this instance King demonstrates his remarkable ability to put meaning into meaninglessness and to mobilize the Christian message to a point at which it becomes a vehicle of actualization for these--God's people. He is here showing his people by precept and example that he believed in and is inspired by the same message he hopes has given them inspiration and hope.

King continued to develop his message and his style. He sought always to keep his actions and his message commensurate with one another. He was not only concerned about the ends to be brought about as a result of the Negroes' drive for freedom, but he was concerned that the means be fair and right as well. He felt that unjust means bring about unjust ends. He was concerned that the movement be run on the high road of dignity and love and not the low road of depravity and hate.

After the Montgomery movement it was quite apparent that King was now the first real charismatic leader that Black people in America had known in many years. He had truly captured the imagination of great numbers of Black people. Thus, it wasn't long before King became the symbol of the movement.

Becoming the symbol of the movement implies that he was recognized by the masses, both Black and white, as the essence and, oftentimes, the existential expression of the movement. This also means that if the symbol is removed, the movement ends. King worked diligently to alleviate this idea in the minds of his people. He wanted them to realize that their hope should not be in him, but in the essence of his

message: the new kingdom soon to come, as it were, a new America--an America where racial justice, equality, dignity and freedom were a reality and not just a dream.

As the symbol of the movement he was called upon quite frequently to come to a particular city and make his presence felt. Where King went, the eyes of the world went, vis-a-vis the mass media. Where King went, his spiritual fervor and moral leadership went, also. King's presence had a tendency to expose white people for what they really were. One might say King brought out the worst in white people. I refer to the Southern whites who were so violently opposed to him and viewed him as an "outside agitator."

King learned to live with the label "outside agitator," and he did not attempt to make apologies for his involvement, no matter where he went.

His assessment of the Birmingham situation, as crystalized in that now famous document entitled, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," clearly dealt with the "outside agitator" label. To be sure, this document is one of the most comprehensive statements of King's intentions, actions and theology to flow from this movement. For me, this document sums up his basis for action from 1955-1963.

This was one of the few times that King took time out to answer criticism of his work and ideas. He commenced this document by seeking to deal with the accusation--"outside agitator." Initially he used a very practical approach:

I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program, if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.<sup>75</sup>

Having established his reason for being there, King moved to another level--the level of Biblical tradition. King seemed always to move to this level, especially when he spoke. This style was his from Montgomery to Memphis. At this level both Black and white people were somehow touched with a sense of commonality and a sense of common religious heritage neither could deny. King wrote:

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.<sup>76</sup>

In his final statement related to this accusation--"outside agitator"--he emphasizes his concern for justice, while at the same time expressing in somewhat philosophical terms, the "interrelatedness" of communities and human beings:

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<sup>75</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 77.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.<sup>77</sup>

If anyone was unclear on King's method and approach to non-violence he clarified that also. In the following portion of this letter he brings clarity to his plan of action, expressing the rationale and the steps therein:

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gain-saying the fact that racial injustices engulf this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers; but, the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.<sup>78</sup>

In the paragraph that follows the above, King goes on to tell about how his group had negotiated in good faith and had promised a moratorium on all demonstrations, the result being that the promises were broken and nothing was accomplished. In response to this he continues his explanation:

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<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on non-violence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?' 'Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?' . . .<sup>79</sup>

In addition to dealing with the facts of the present situation as a matter of motivation for his actions, King also displayed a keen (sense of) historical awareness. He was able to pick up strands of history as a means of validation for his actions. He obviously knew how to let history help him fight his battle. He refers to history in the following statement:

Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture, but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.<sup>80</sup>

King's analysis of laws and his assertion that there is a higher law to which he appeals, reveals his connectedness with that which transcends him and impinges on him to act. He writes:

One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that 'an unjust law is no law at all.' Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An

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<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.<sup>81</sup>

In order to complete his interpretation of just and unjust laws, he also goes into a theological renunciation of segregation and laws of segregation. In this instance, as well as in many other instances, we find King displaying a somewhat unique knowledge of contemporary theological ideas. He writes:

All segregation statutes are unjust, because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an 'I-it' relationship for an 'I-thou' relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence, segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.<sup>82</sup>

Another dimension of King's intellectual ability is poignantly revealed in the manner in which he weaves his position in and out of Biblical tradition and history. In writing on civil disobedience he illustrates this method:

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks

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<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Soc-rates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.<sup>83</sup>

In Birmingham, as in other places, King was accused of not letting time take its course. His response to this accusation makes plain his unique awareness of time. In this instance, King alludes to what I interpret as that which informs his hope. I refer to his implications in regard to man's responsibility to God in seeking to bring in his kingdom. However, in this example, his idea of hope is directed at whites. At the same time I don't feel this negates the reality of his message of hope as received and understood by Blacks. King commences this explanation of time by referring to a letter he has received:

I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: 'All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth.' Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral: it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.



Without a doubt, the above statement reflects King's faith in a Christian moral theology, and, as well, his faith in the American ideals--American ideals which have often been veiled in that same Christian moral theological package. This, too, is a portion of that which informed his message of hope and made it a truly desirable package for Black people at that time.

As we well know, the question of non-violence versus violence, the influence of the Negro church as another worldly-oriented church, and the authority of the church's being involved in the civil rights issue at all, were time and time again thrust upon King.

King deals with these questions in a somewhat precise manner in this same document, "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

In referring to the matter of violence and non-violence, King demonstrates his insightfulness into the psychological and sociological conditions of both Black and white people in America and, more specifically, both groups in the South. He also reveals knowledge of his role in events--past, present and future. The following statements are illustrative of my point:

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first, I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my non-violent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one

of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elija Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible 'devil.'<sup>85</sup>

Now, in the following statement, King attempts to interpret his role:

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the 'do-nothingism' of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and non-violent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of non-violence became an integral part of our struggle.<sup>86</sup>

In the following somewhat apologetic statement, which is nevertheless an accurate one, King reveals both to Blacks and whites the inevitable outcome of the use of violence as opposed to non-violence. At the same time he is attempting to strengthen his philosophy of non-violence:

If this philosophy had not emerged, by now, many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as 'rabble-rousers' and 'outside agitators' those of us who employ non-violent direct-action, and if they refuse to support our non-violent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies--a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.<sup>87</sup>

In attempting to deal with the issue of the church's involvement in social issues, King once again speaks out of Christian tradition.

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<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*

He also analyzes the present condition of the church in the face of social issues. Finally, he places the onus for positive action upon the church, leaving as an alternative its eventual demise. He writes:

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion, it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were, too, God-intoxicated to be 'astronomically intimidated.' By their effort and example, they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.<sup>88</sup>

I feel that one statement in reference to the prevalent criticism of the other-worldly orientation of the Negro church should suffice to rebut this idea. That is, King's message turned Black people's other-worldly eschatology around to a this-worldly realized eschatology. The expectations which he pulled out of the Christian message were existentially oriented and spoke to the here and now desires, and hopes

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

of Black people. For the experience of racial justice, equality and freedom were expressed by King as present hopes and ever-increasing realities.

One writer, Haig Basmajian, in summing up the importance of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" said:

Considering the time, the place, the audience, the speaker, and the form, 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' can stand side by side with the great public letters of the past. Dr. King has chosen premises, upon which he builds his arguments, that are acceptable to almost all Americans . . . while he has aroused emotions, he has not turned to exciting anger or hate, fear or envy. Martin Luther King's letter is rhetorically superior to any specific persuasive discourse which his critics and adversaries have produced. He has remained on a high plane, his goal for the brotherhood of man is thus exemplified in the word and in the spirit of his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'<sup>89</sup>

#### March on Washington, D.C.

The famous "March on Washington, D.C." which took place in August, 1963, stands out as one of the triumphant successes of King's non-violent appeal and approach. Actually, this march demonstrated to the nation and to the world the efficacy of the hope which was symbolized for Black people in America by the man, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Even more than this, he demonstrated by action and word, his faith in American ideals.

On this day in Washington, he spoke to all America, informing it of its responsibility to all its citizens. He sought to transform

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<sup>89</sup> Haig Basmajian, "The Letter from Birmingham Jail," in Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

ignorance and hate into enlightenment and love. In this speech, he offered an existential expression of his hope for the entire country. This speech was truly rooted in America's best ideals which, of course, spoke to both Black and white Americans. And, in addition to that, he lifted up the fervent Black church rhetoric which reaches into the heart of the Black man and somehow gives him a new lease on life. His final utterance, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream," served as cataclysmic meshing together of the man, King--as the symbol of freedom, justice, and equality--and his message which engendered hope, seemingly being realized at that moment.

#### Non-violence and Love

Thus far in this study I have made allusions to King's philosophy and theology of non-violence and love. However, it becomes overwhelmingly important that I explore his emphasis on these ideals in more detail at this point.

Montgomery, Birmingham, Albany, Selma, Chicago and Memphis; wherever King went, he took with him and preached his philosophy of non-violence and his theology of love. Even more than this, he sought to actualize these ideals by making himself a living example.

Martin Luther King's powerful advocacy of the Gospel of Love would have been powerless without its intimate relationship to non-violent direct-action and civil disobedience. It seems that they go hand in hand. I am well aware that King had, and still has, many detractors to his philosophy and actions; however, my intention at this

point is to let his message speak for itself. My desire is to lift up the real strengths of his message and actions to see wherein they motivated and inspired others to action.

In his book, *Strength to Love* (a compilation of his sermons), there is one sermon which goes far in expressing his Gospel of Love. The sermon is entitled, "Loving Your Enemies."<sup>90</sup>

In this sermon King attempts to answer two questions which refer to loving one's enemies: "How do we love our enemies?" and "Why should we love our enemies?"<sup>91</sup> Prior to answering these questions he relates the words of Jesus as they come from the Bible:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, persecute you; that ye may be children of your father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:43-45).<sup>92</sup>

His initial attempt is to preface this sermon with an understanding of how difficult it is to love one's enemies. He accomplishes this by referring to prevalent feelings of men about this ideal. For example, he refers to the general feeling that "it is easy, . . . to love those who love you, but how can one love those who openly and insidiously seek to defeat you?"<sup>93</sup> He follows this by using the philosopher Nietzsche's contention--"Jesus' exhortation to love one's enemies is testimony to the fact the Christian ethic is designed for the

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<sup>90</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 34.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-37.      <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.      <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

weak and cowardly, and not for the strong and courageous."<sup>94</sup>

On the basis of these statements, King's insistence is that no matter what the objection, "this command of Jesus challenges us with new urgency."<sup>95</sup> King's empathetic approach is very much in evidence here, as he attempts to set his audience at ease by demonstrating his awareness of their feelings in regard to this command. At the same time he informs them that Jesus, too, "understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy."<sup>96</sup>

Speaking to his Christian audience, he entreats them to accept their responsibility as Christians. He says: "Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives."<sup>97</sup>

Now we turn to the questions he attempted to answer in this sermon. We should remember that these were questions which King was always seeking to answer both by precept and example. In answering the first question, "How do we love our enemies?" he weaves the Gospel tradition and the existential situation into a garment of practicality. He says: "First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."<sup>98</sup> Here King places a prior responsibility on the individual, imploring him to have the power to forgive. He carries this idea a step further, insisting that "it is impossible even to begin the act of

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<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

loving one's enemies without the prior acceptance of the necessity, over and over again, of forgiving those who inflict evil and injury upon us."<sup>99</sup> The implication being that the oppressed is required to perform the ethical act of forgiving. To be sure, in making this ethical decision the victim achieves a sort of self-purification. For without this sort of self-cleansing, it is somewhat impossible to understand forgiveness as reconciliation. In the words of King, "forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again."<sup>100</sup> Consequently, our ability to love results in direct proportion to our ability to forgive.

Secondly, King's contention is that there is an essential element of goodness in every human being, even though it may be hard to discern in our "enemy-neighbor."<sup>101</sup> We are compelled to realize that all of us have split personalities working in opposition to ourselves at various times. We are further informed that this basically means . . . "there is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us."<sup>102</sup> King reflects an uncanny knowledge of the duplicity in man's personality. This is evident in the way he continually admonishes his Black brethren to recognize this evil in his oppressor, but at the same time, to realize that he--the oppressor--is capable of more noble deeds and actions than he may presently be demonstrating. In short, King is assuredly a believer in the basic goodness of men.

King's message here is two-edged and demands attention from both

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*



the oppressed and the oppressor. To be sure, he places the burden of self-examination, the burden of guilt, out in the open for the oppressor to see himself. I'm sure that when he speaks as he does in the following portion of this sermon, he intends it to fall on the ears and hearts of both Black and white people in America. He writes:

When we look beneath the surface, beneath the impulsive deed, we see within our enemy-neighbor a measure of goodness and know that the viciousness and evilness of his acts are not quite representative of all that he is. We see him in a new light. We recognize that this hate grows out of fear, pride, ignorance, prejudice and misunderstanding, but in spite of this, we know God's image is ineffably etched in his being.<sup>103</sup>

With the use of subtle, insightful, and probing conceptualization, King here makes it possible for both parties to the conflict to understand themselves, as well as each other. Consequently, he gives us the ethical decision: "Then we love our enemies by realizing that they are not totally bad and that they are not beyond the reach of God's redemptive love."<sup>104</sup>

In this sermon King makes clear what he means when he talks about loving one's enemies. He wishes us to understand that he is not talking about some kind of sloppy, affectionate, and/or romantic kind of love. He is referring to the kind of love which is best expressed in the Greek language as *agape*. He explains the term *agape* in the following manner:

. . . understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. An overflowing love which seeks nothing in return, *agape* is the love of God operating in the human heart. At this level

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

we love men not because we like them, not because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some type of divine spark; we love every man because God loves him. At this level, we love the person who does an evil deed, although we hate the deed that he does.<sup>105</sup>

Having dealt with the question--"How do we love our enemies?"--King follows this by seeking to explain "Why should we love our enemies?" He relates four reasons why we should love our enemies.

The first reason is simply stated, he says, "fairly obvious."<sup>106</sup> "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."<sup>107</sup> King was keenly aware and thoroughly convinced that evil begets evil, and that love, as he understood it, was the most powerful weapon available to man, especially the oppressed Black man. One cannot deny that love is a weapon at most everyone's disposal . . . one has but to use it or try it.

His second reason for loving our enemies reflects King's knowledge of the psychological makeup of man. More than this, it takes into account the mental health of man, and the need for continued positive care of that health. He implores us to love our enemies, because: "Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality. Mindful that hate is an evil and dangerous force, we too often think of what it does to the person hated."<sup>108</sup> That is, it allows the hated the freedom and abandonment of will to seek to inflict pain and destruction on the hater

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

without suffering pain of conscience. However, he contends that there is another side to hate which is also destructive, and which we must be aware of. He says:

Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away at its vital unity. Hate destroys a man's sense of values and his objectivity. It causes him to describe the beautiful as ugly and the ugly as beautiful, and to confuse the true with the false and the false with the true.<sup>109</sup>

I understand King to be attempting to mirror the behavior of the oppressor before the oppressed in such a manner as to cause the oppressed to repudiate this kind of behavior, as well as the force that motivates such behavior. In this case the force is the hate which is so morally destructive.

The third reason he gives for loving one's enemies was previously alluded to. He says: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."<sup>110</sup> One may argue with this simply-stated idea. However, when we examine the history of human events, we tend to realize that if an enemy can be transformed into a friend, ultimately the only force truly capable of achieving this is love. In his subsequent discussion of this reason he lends strength to the profound idea he has posited. He says:

We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.<sup>111</sup>

Finally, King insists that we have our mandate from Jesus. He

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<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

understands this to be a more basic reason than any of the others. At the same time he obviously understands it to be an ultimate reason as well. He quotes Jesus:

*'Love your enemies . . . that ye may be the children of your Father which is in Heaven.'* We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique love that potentially becomes actuality. We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.<sup>112</sup>

King's clarion call to love the enemy was always somewhat inspiring to the Blacks and comforting, as well as discomforting, to the whites. However, I am sure that the love to which he referred was impotent and ineffective without some other ingredient. Without this other ingredient, the love to which King referred would have been no more than well-phrased rhetoric, sounding good coming out, but very ineffectual in its application. Thus, the ingredient to which I refer is his action approach. Specifically, this means his call for, and mobilization of, non-violent direct-action iced over with civil disobedience. By adding this ingredient to his concept of love, he was able to bring it into direct confrontation with the force of hate and violence. In so doing he made it possible for the nation and the world to see that hate was vicious and violent and the only weapon which the oppressor seemed capable of using. At the same time, he allowed the oppressed a noble means of expressing themselves, a means far superior to the savage methods of the oppressor. The oppressed Blacks of America somehow got an idea of the powerful weapon they had at their

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<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

disposal, namely redemptive love wrapped in the garment of non-violence and sanctioned by God Almighty.

### Non-violence

History has yet to reveal the true meaning of non-violence as it was a part of the civil rights struggle, and as it was subscribed to by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His detractors have been many, especially in recent years. They have said that it only shows a man's weakness and makes him more vulnerable to the oppressor's mad violence and dehumanizing acts. They have said that the only thing that the white man in America understands and respects is violence. I submit at once that these are correct and incorrect criticisms. To be sure, some men do have a tendency to perceive a non-violent person as weak and easy to control. However, if one understands non-violence as King sought to actualize it, and in the situations where he sought to actualize it, there will come a profound understanding of the reservoirs of strength and power readily accessible to the user of this tactic.

In the first place, King was very much aware of the tactical value of non-violence. He was not talking about passive crying, begging and pleading non-violence. Indeed, he was referring to the brand of non-violence which he called non-violent direct-action. He was concerned about creating tension and disorder in the tranquil South, so as to provoke segregationists to cooperate by responding with violent repression. The record shows that this was accomplished with great success throughout the civil rights struggle in the South.

In his book, *The Trumpet of Conscience*, which is a series of lectures that he gave over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as the seventh annual series of Massey Lectures, he spoke on non-violence. The title of this lecture is "Non-Violence and Social Change."<sup>113</sup> This lecture was presented in 1967, so we know that not only is he explaining his ideas on non-violence, but he is also reflecting on past experiences.

In this brief lecture he reviews the successes which were made in the South by virtue of using this strategy of non-violent civil disobedience. He refers to the gigantic battle waged in Birmingham, and how this battle put before the "court of world opinion the urgent need for change."<sup>114</sup>—change in terms of integrated public accommodations.

He goes on to say:

Without violence, we totally disrupted the system, the life style of Birmingham, and then Selma, with their unjust and unconstitutional laws. Our Birmingham struggle came to its dramatic climax when some 3,500 demonstrators virtually filled every jail in that city and surrounding communities, and some 4,000 more continued to march and demonstrate non-violently. The city knew then in terms that were crystal-clear that Birmingham could no longer continue to function until the demands of the Negro community were met. The same kind of dramatic crisis was created in Selma two years later. The result on the national scene was the Civil Right Bill and the Voting Rights Act, as President and Congress responded to the drama and the creative tension generated by the carefully planned demonstration.<sup>115</sup>

The above paragraph stands out as a dramatic statement of King's

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<sup>113</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. xi.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

sincere faith and trust in the ability of non-violent actions serving as a weapon capable of bringing about social change.

King's faith in non-violence was obviously buttressed by the fact that, even in the midst of the horrible riots of that year, the violence which occurred was directed mostly at property, rather than persons. To be sure, the violence which King unreservedly deplored was the violence which historically had been directed toward persons--Black persons. King was intent upon demonstrating to the world that non-violence is a weapon of power.

Non-violence as a weapon of power proved to be far more effective in the South than in the North. I am sure there are many reasons for this conclusion. I wish to state a few. First of all, King was a son of the South, and this could not be denied him. Secondly, he was aware that, for the most part, Southern whites and Blacks are God-fearing people, and their consciences are easily pricked by word and deed which seem to be sanctioned and blessed by God. Thirdly, King was able to arm his people with a weapon which they had never used before--non-violent civil disobedience. And after being armed with this weapon, they saw how effective it was. In effect, non-violent direct-action, coupled with the Christian love ethic, gave southern God-fearing Black people an opportunity to do two things: effect confrontation between themselves and their oppressors, and interpret their own actions as positive Christian actions--the act of loving one's "enemy-neighbor."

In the North there was, and is, a somewhat different psyche on the part of both the oppressed and the oppressor. The oppressed Black

people in big city ghettos experience life as a continual struggle for survival. Most of life is disappointing, defeating, and frustrating for them. The ghetto dweller sees affluence all around, but usually sees little hope of eventual attainment of it. He recognizes the oppressor as those agents of the American system who invade his neighborhood by day and, except for one, leave at sundown. These agents are properly described as merchants (all kinds), welfare workers, health inspectors, mobsters and law enforcement officers. The law enforcement officer is the one exception referred to above; he remains and maintains the brutalization process.

To be sure, under the pale of such dehumanizing circumstances the ghetto man does not consider non-violence as a viable means of gaining his rights or overcoming his oppression. He realizes that he lives in a violent world, and that his only weapon for demanding change is violence. For the most part, the ghetto dweller does not see his hope for change rooted in the "Christian structures of existence."

We can safely say that, in the North, the oppressor is part of a well-devised system--a system which in some way works cooperatively with both its legal representatives and the illegal big-time criminal or syndicate elements, insuring political and economic control over the ghetto dweller.

The one time King attempted to bring his non-violent direct-action "love thine enemy" philosophy to the North he was faced with the confluence of the above-mentioned circumstances. They worked so overwhelmingly against his efforts that he had to pack up and go back South.



I refer to his 1965 Chicago escapade, which, except for its success with "Operation Breadbasket," was very unsuccessful. Louis Lomax, writer and columnist, says of King's Chicago campaign:

Chicago was Martin's first, and last campaign outside the South. It was his big effort to stave off the black violence then spreading across the republic; it was his final stand against black power. Chicago was a failure, not for his Christian, non-violent attack upon complex socio-economic problems. Chicago was final evidence that *The System* that controls the ghetto would not yield power to the non-violent and the civilized. Only those who were willing to burn and loot had the power to get things done.<sup>116</sup>

Chicago made evident to King and masses of Black Americans that the quest for liberation as related to Christian hope, even though unique in its inception, and though it had given hope to thousands of the hopeless, was far past its usefulness in their struggle.

### King's Hope

The implications of King's ineffectiveness in Chicago are not yet conclusive. However, there is much to be said about the implications of his general approach to liberation. I am mainly concerned with three questions in regard to King's message, action, and hope as related to liberation. First, what informed his hope? Secondly, does his message still move Black people? Thirdly, what does this mean for the unique Black experience?

King's hope was obviously theologically oriented. That is, he believed that the problems of man would and must ultimately be solved

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<sup>116</sup> Lincoln, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

in direct relation to man's knowledge of and devotion to the work of God's kingdom. He was certain that each man contained a bit of God's essence, and that if man becomes aware of this relationship to God he will ultimately see himself as a brotherhood under the fatherhood of God. King's concept of God tends to reveal itself precisely at this point.

King's concept of God is a highly personalistic view. This probably accounts for the high degree of certainty and assurance that he had--knowing that God was for the cause of the oppressed Black man in America. Even more than that, he knew that God worked in behalf of all oppressed people everywhere. His view is that God and man were "made one in a marvelous unity of purpose through overflowing love as the free gift of himself on the part of God and by perfect obedience and receptivity on the part of man . . ."<sup>117</sup> For King, man and God are working together as partners, seeking always to overcome evil with love. King is not hesitant to insist that man's responsibility in the face of God is to attempt to cast out evil in the world. He understands God as being in the world making right what men have made wrong.

His concept of God spoke meaningfully to the situation in which he found himself and his people. On the one hand, it gave him a source of strength and a will to overcome injustice and evil. On the other hand, the people he sought to inspire--Black people--could relate to this kind of God, for they could thus realize God as working in their behalf.

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<sup>117</sup>M. King, *Strength to Love*, p. 124. .

King's hope was also informed by his faith in redemptive goodwill. He was convinced that if goodwill were executed by the oppressed toward the oppressor, the oppressor would possibly be redeemed.

Another element of redemption was significant for him--dying for the cause. He sought to make plain to all of his followers that dying for a just cause can be, and is, redemptive. He stressed this by saying, "The man who has nothing worth dying for has nothing to live for."

Thus, he presented oppressed Black people a challenge--let their cause transcend the present, and see the beauty of a better future for themselves, their children, the race, the nation and the world.

Certainly another element cogent to his hope was his strong conviction of "rightness"--that is, the rightness of his cause. This conviction was rooted in the Christian tradition of Biblical proclamation, and in American ideals of justice, equality and freedom as well. Consequently, his followers became convinced that the Bible enjoined them to demand their rights, and American ideals provided the framework for realization of their rights.

King's religious and spiritual fervor, which are so much a part of the Black experience, served as a powerful element for inspiring Black people who, for the most part, were church-oriented.

One might ask: How was King's message of hope sufficient for Black people? My immediate answer is: Because he was able to speak and act in ways which were acceptable to the psyche of Black people, especially Black people in the South. However, I am compelled to go beyond this answer and seek the "why" and the "how."

King must have been aware that for the most part Black people always had a hope rooted in some beautiful and meaningful future. Being aware of this hope he sought to bring that future into some meaningful present. He achieved this by letting them know that they could bring about that future through their own concentrated efforts and actions. He presented them with the concepts of non-violent direct-action and civil disobedience. For him, both concepts appealed to a higher law, the law of God's justice and love. Thus, the oppressed Black people of the South could in some way get off their knees in dignity and seek their just rights, knowing that whether they lived or died, their cause was beyond self and tied to the eternal. King's idea of just means and just ends was also an enabling and dignifying force which allowed his people to see that when change came to pass, they would indeed win a "double victory"--freedom for themselves and real freedom to love on the part of their oppressors.

King gave his people the crucial next step in the above process --the action step. He put them in situations where they could challenge existing oppressive laws and traditions. Subsequently, they would have to go to jail and suffer the indignities of brutal policemen in order to dramatize their cause and make some kind of change inevitable. Thus, these acts became symbolic acts, in that they were committed to achieve a greater gain.

A profound intangible, which added to the hope which King presented Black people, was his seeming invincibility. Both past and present history informed them that Black leaders of King's type, Black

leaders who threatened the white man's powerful status quo, did not survive long. They were either morally killed or physically killed. When he was needed most, King survived both kinds of death. Therefore, it was not difficult for this kind of invincibility to instill hope where there had been no hope, and to bolster faith in the future.

Does his message still move Black people? I am convinced that as a message which appeals to Black people's highest ideals, King's message still has powerful meaning. However, the present-day response is more nostalgic than motivational. I suspect that what I am really saying is that, in view of the fact that the powerful white majority in America has refused to relinquish any of its power, but instead, has placed more barriers in the Black man's road, King's message no longer moves Black people. Instead, Black people have come to realize that non-violence is a two-way street which must be trod by Black and white alike. Thus, non-violence must come to rest on America's ash heap of high ideals and magnificent promises.

What does this mean for the unique Black experience? This means that we must move to another level of the struggle for freedom, justice and equality. It also means that the unique Black experience, in all its dimensions, is still a struggle. If it is still a struggle, the question is, what new form will the struggle take? Will it be "an eye for an eye?" Will it be aggressive violence? Finally, will it be an agonizing approach to life which will make the law of the jungle look like child's play?

We must be reminded, whatever form the struggle for Black

liberation in America takes, if it is devoid of real possible actualization, is therefore devoid of hope. When the struggle for liberation is devoid of hope, existence inevitably becomes meaningless.

I have alluded to several kinds of action which may come to pass in America as a means for Black liberation. However, I hasten to add that other actions have always been present; they have not held "center stage" as King's actions have. I also recognize the fact that, even before the diminishing appeal of King's methods, other options were making themselves known, and were beginning to make King's philosophy pleasing to the oppressor and displeasing to the oppressed. One such option was presented by the late Malcolm X. His option was somewhat multi-faceted, but, in short, one might describe it as the demanding of freedom, justice and equality, and seeking to gain them "by any means necessary."

In the next chapter I will describe Malcolm X's revolutionary hope and seek to reveal that which informed his hope. We will then be able to determine its meaning for the liberation of Black Americans.

## CHAPTER III

### MALCOLM X AND REVOLUTIONARY HOPE

This chapter will focus on the events in Malcolm X's life which seem to shed light on the making of such a strong revolutionary personality. Consideration will be given to the environment and family life of Malcolm so that one can better understand Malcolm X, the man.

I will view Malcolm X as a purveyor of a revolutionary message---revolutionary, in the sense that he uttered words to Black people in America which to the ears of white people sounded tantamount to militant and violent eradication of all those who perpetrated the evils of racism upon Black people. I view Malcolm as another person out of the unique Black experience in America who is expressing a kind of hope and even a profound hope which motivated masses of Black people to some kind of revolutionary action.

Assuming there is a unique Black experience in America implies that Malcolm, being a part of that experience, Malcolm being a product of that experience, reflects in his message some of that experience. My intention is to illustrate this experience in this presentation and analysis of the actions and preachments of this revolutionary individual.

Malcolm X's autobiography entitled *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley as told to him by Malcolm, is probably the most reliable source available for gaining knowledge of his early life. His autobiography must be assumed as a conscious attempt, on his part,

to reveal to the reader why he is like he is and how he interprets events in his life in terms of their effect on making him what he finally became. One must also assume that Alex Haley, in some way, must have filtered and interpreted, as it were, redacted some of the information given to him so as to gratify his peculiar psychological bias. Consequently, this kind of autobiography makes it somewhat difficult to confidently rely on anything other than factual information and my interpretation of same, based on my particular psychological bias. Acknowledging this as a basis of interpretation and study, I will take the risk of building my picture of Malcolm X as he seemed to understand himself, as Alex Haley reported it, and as other observers have so interpreted him.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska.<sup>1</sup> He was the fourth of eight children born to his mother and father. However, he had three other children in his family, who were grown, which were his father's by a previous marriage.<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to mention these children because one of them played somewhat of a major role in his life, at certain points. The one to whom I refer is named Ella.

Shortly after Malcolm was born, his family moved to Milwaukee. However, it wasn't long afterwards that they moved to Lansing, Michigan.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.



Lansing figures prominently in the early life of Malcolm X.

Malcolm's father was apparently a very independent, determined Black man who provided fairly well for his family. He was a Christian preacher with no particular congregation, and he was also a follower of Marcus Garvey, the well-known Black nationalist of that day. Malcolm reports that his father "during the week" . . . "was roaming about spreading word of Marcus Garvey."<sup>4</sup>

Malcolm's mother was a light-complexioned West Indian, who resented the circumstances of her birth because she was born as a result of her mother's being raped by a white man in the West Indies.<sup>5</sup> At a very tender age Malcolm's mother instilled in him a dislike for the white man, because of the shameful incidence of her birth. Malcolm notes that his mother seemed to treat him worse as a child because he was light in skin color and somewhat reminded her of her conditions of birth which she hated.<sup>6</sup>

During those times the racial situation in Lansing, Michigan, was very sad and left much to be desired. Negroes had the worst jobs; they were restricted to a certain part of the city, and were not allowed in East Lansing after dark.<sup>7</sup> The white people had no intentions of allowing a Black man to fair well in those days in that city. Malcolm relates that his father was attempting to save money to buy a store, but somehow the whites found out about his plan and, subsequently, they started a "get-out-of-town threat."<sup>8</sup> These threats were

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

perpetrated by the local hate society called the Black Legion. Surprisingly, this group wore black robes rather than white.<sup>9</sup> Everywhere his father went, Black Legionnaires called his father an 'uppity nigger,' because he wanted to own a store, because he lived outside the Negro district of Lansing and "for spreading unrest and dissension among the 'good niggers.'<sup>10</sup> This is illustrative of the kind of psychological racial environment into which young Malcolm was thrust.

When Malcolm was four years of age his house was burned to the ground by two white men. Police and firemen who were called to the scene just stood around and watched the house burn down.<sup>11</sup> At the age of six, Malcolm lost his father in a violent death at the hands of white men.<sup>12</sup> These were early developments in his life which presumably left a seed of hate in his mind toward white men which would somehow germinate at a later date. As a result of his father's violent death, Malcolm's mother was left with the responsibility of feeding and clothing eight children. The only thing they had going for them was that they lived in their own house which their father had built for them after the other one had burned down.<sup>13</sup> His mother's greatest desire was to keep her children together, but, inevitably, this turned out to be impossible. Jobs were hard for her to come by, because as soon as it was discovered that she was that 'uppity nigger's' wife, the people would no longer need her services.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

In 1934, the bottom fell out of his family's condition and things got worse. Malcolm refers to "some kind of psychological deterioration" having hit his family, eating away at their pride.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, they had to go on relief. They hated this because it was embarrassing and destroyed their sense of dignity. Malcolm said, "At school, the 'on relief' finger suddenly was pointed at us, too and sometimes it was said aloud."<sup>16</sup> One can imagine how demoralizing this would be to a child Malcolm's age, and probably this would be something hard to live down, which it certainly was for him.

It was about this time that a change began to take place in Malcolm, he says:

Sometimes, instead of going home from school, I walked the two miles up the road to Lansing. I began drifting from store to store, hanging around outside where things like apples were displayed in boxes and barrels and baskets, and I would watch my chance to steal me a treat. You know what a treat was to me? Anything!<sup>17</sup>

We might view this kind of act as the beginning of a very rough road for Malcolm. He says that the more he stayed away from home and the more he stole from the stores, "the more aggressive I became in my inclinations. I never wanted to wait for anything."<sup>18</sup>

In 1937, Malcolm's mother more or less lost contact with reality and was subsequently committed to a state institution. This created the situation for breaking up the family. The state allowed the two

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

oldest children to remain at the family house and the others were spread about among other families in Lansing.<sup>19</sup> Even though they were spread out they still were pretty close by virtue of their contacts in the school.

Malcolm's deportment in school became progressively worse. It finally reached the point of his expulsion.<sup>20</sup> The family he was living with was ordered to take him to court because he was a ward of the state. He was thereby ordered to reform school.<sup>21</sup> This was at the age of 13.<sup>22</sup>

In order for the court's process to begin, he was sent to a detention home in Mason, Michigan. This home was where the 'bad' boys and girls from Ingham County were held before they went to reform school. However, Malcolm remained at the detention home and was enrolled in the junior high school as the only Negro in the school.<sup>23</sup> The school situation must have had its effect on Malcolm, or at least it subtly cultured that white hate seed which had been planted much earlier in his life. He was commonly referred to as "nigger," "rastus," and "coon" just as if they were his names. There wasn't much of anything he could do to stop this, so he learned to live with it.<sup>24</sup> Maybe he even grew to accept it.

It was in this school that Malcolm blossomed and became an

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<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 25-28.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

excellent student. He played on the basketball team and became president of his eighth grade class. Thus, we find he was learning the meaning of success. It seems that there is one episode which took place during his time at this junior high school that really made its mark on him. This episode took place after he had spent the summer in Boston with his older half-sister, Ella, where he had seen black people living in conditions of dignity, mixing with whites, and moving freely about the city.<sup>25</sup> After that summer of discovering big city life with its fast pace and many dimensions, which were so amazingly new to him, he returned to Mason, Michigan, and his junior high school. One of the teachers whom he felt really liked him asked him what he was thinking about doing for a career. Malcolm fired back that he intended to be a lawyer. This teacher informed Malcolm that he "must be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer--that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be."<sup>26</sup> Apparently, this incident had a jarring effect on Malcolm, for he says: "The more I thought afterwards about what he said, the more uneasy it made me. It just kept treading around in my mind."<sup>27</sup> Malcolm indicates that he was really disturbed by this, because this same man had encouraged others in his class to become whatever it was that they indicated they wanted to become.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, not one of them had earned marks as high as his. He says:

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

It was a surprising thing that I had never thought of it that way before, but I realized that whatever I wasn't, I *was* smarter than nearly all of those white kids. But apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be.

It was then that I began to change inside.

I drew away from white people. I came to class and I answered when called upon. It became a physical strain simply to sit in Mr. Ostrowski's class.

Where 'nigger' had slipped off my back before, wherever I heard it now, I stopped and looked at whoever said it. And they looked surprised that I did.<sup>29</sup>

It is evident that this episode had a significant effect on Malcolm, and was somewhat, if not greatly, responsible for his leaving Lansing as well as changing his outlook on life.

After graduating from the eighth grade, Malcolm returned to Boston to live with his sister, Ella.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that at this time Malcolm was large for his age and looked much older than he was.<sup>31</sup>

Malcolm's life in Boston turned out to be a downhill experience. Somehow, he found that he enjoyed life in the ghetto with the down-and-outers, the hustlers, the prostitutes, and the dope addicts. He enjoyed this life more than middle-class Negro life which his sister desired for him. He worked at various jobs and associated with all kinds of people, and took on the life style of the fast-moving ghetto people.

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

One could probably point to certain particular events out of this period of Malcolm's life which might have influenced his later character, but I view this whole period of his life as one long event which greatly influenced what he was to become. For the purposes of this study, I shall refer to this period in Malcolm's life as the "middle period." This period lasted for about ten years, or, in terms of age, from Malcolm's age 15 until around age 25.

During this "middle period" Malcolm worked on the railroad as a pullman porter. This was the beginning of his experiences outside of Boston. While running on the road, he got the opportunity to see Washington, D.C. In Washington, he was amazed at the poor living conditions of the Negro people living so close to the capitol.<sup>32</sup> It was during this "middle period" and while running on the road that he was introduced to New York City and, more specifically, Harlem. He had been anxious to see Harlem, because he had heard so much about it when he lived in Boston.<sup>33</sup>

Malcolm eventually made Harlem his home base. In Harlem, Malcolm worked as a waiter in one of the very popular night clubs.<sup>34</sup> He got to know many celebrities and became close friends of theirs. In Harlem, Malcolm saw and participated in all kinds of activities, legal and illegal. Malcolm was slowly becoming addicted to narcotics. He used mostly reefers and cocaine.<sup>35</sup> During this "middle period," while

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78.

living in Harlem, Malcolm became involved in the numbers racket, bootlegging liquor, selling reefers (marijuana), and gambling, just to mention a few things.

Malcolm learned to talk the language of the streets. It was crucial to know the language of the streets in order to maneuver in his new world. Malcolm became acquainted with hustlers, pimps, prostitutes and all of the shady characters who made their living by using their abilities to scheme, lie, cheat and steal. These kinds of people were some of Malcolm's best friends. Malcolm acquired quite a reputation in Harlem, where he was known as "Detroit Red," and he was eventually looked upon as a bold "crazy nigger" who was not afraid to kill anyone.<sup>36</sup>

Malcolm came close to death several times while involved in his hustling life in Harlem. Inevitably, he got too hot for Harlem and left it for Boston.<sup>37</sup> By this time he was really hooked on heavy narcotics and was staying high most of the time.<sup>38</sup>

When he arrived in Boston, he discovered that his reputation from Harlem had gotten up there, so that made it quite easy for him to maneuver in the ghetto area of Boston.<sup>39</sup> It was in Boston, however, that Malcolm met his nemesis. In trying to decide on some kind of hustle which would bring fast money, Malcolm came up with the scheme of a burglary ring. In company with two other Black men and several white

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 126-133.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.



girls, he began to operate his burglary scheme. They were very successful for quite a long period of time. However, they were finally caught and convicted. The surprising thing about their conviction was that there was more concern about their being involved with white women than there was about their crime of burglary. Malcolm received eight to ten years in the Massachusetts State Prison.<sup>40</sup>

Malcolm's "middle period" culminated in his seeming demise. However, in reflection, Malcolm saw this period as one in which he became well-educated to ways of the world, and to the ways of the white man and how his system is so oppressive to Black people. Malcolm learned well the lesson of "night integration" by white folk, and he became very much aware of the deception and lies which are tied to the race issue in America. That is, he saw with his own eyes how the same white folks who denied Black people a fair and equal opportunity to survive in the economic structures of this society were the white people who came looking for Black people to satisfy their basic sexual desires.

Malcolm credits this period of his life to his having learned how to survive by using his own basic wits. It is obvious that Malcolm became aware of, as well, a part of that dog-eat-dog life in the ghetto. During this period he was able to realize the Black man's plight merely to survive. Survival was seen as a conscious twenty-four-hour-a-day process. Survival meant going so far as to narcotize oneself or get high, merely to relieve oneself from the oppressive nature of

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<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 140-150.

this society toward Black people. The appropriate expression of his unique Black experience is adequately summed up in this statement, which comes out of the Muslim movement in America: "The white man's Heaven is the Black man's Hell."<sup>41</sup>

This "middle period" of Malcolm's life prepared him to meet the task which later was to become his responsibility. On the basis of his street education, he would eventually know how to reach the poor, frustrated, angry, unintelligent Black man whose whole life is spent suffering in the ghetto.

In prison, Malcolm went through a most unusual metamorphosis. This did not take place immediately upon his entry into prison, but it was not long thereafter. He seems to feel that it started in 1947, when he met a very intelligent prisoner named Bimbi, who seemed to know everything about anything.<sup>42</sup> This prisoner encouraged him to read and improve his knowledge. He was not really too interested in what Bimbi said to him, but he was quite impressed with his ability; as a matter of fact, he was somewhat envious of him. Bimbi took an interest in Malcolm and encouraged him to use the good brains that he had. Malcolm decided to take a correspondence course in English in order to improve his writing and communication skills. He had discovered, in writing to members of his family, he was unable to construct a decent sentence.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 64.

<sup>42</sup>Haley, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-155, 171.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

In 1948, Malcolm was transferred to another prison. At this prison Malcolm was so mean and hard to get along with he was given the nickname "Satan."<sup>44</sup>

During that year Malcolm received a letter from his brother Philbert. In this letter Philbert informed Malcolm that he had joined the "Nation of Islam" a religion which was known as the 'natural religion for the black man.'<sup>45</sup> Philbert went so far as to say that Malcolm should 'pray to Allah for deliverance.'<sup>46</sup> Since Philbert was always joining something, and since he had earlier written Malcolm and told him that his 'holiness' church was praying for him, he was not impressed at all. He wrote a very ugly response to Philbert in regard to his new revelations.<sup>47</sup>

Not long after this Malcom received a letter from his younger brother, Reginald. Reginald had been with him as a favorite brother during some of his time in New York, so he really trusted Reginald. Reginald's letter contained this instruction: 'Malcolm, don't eat any more pork, and don't smoke any more cigarettes. I'll show you how to get out of prison.'<sup>48</sup> This order by his brother was somewhat striking to him, because he very much desired to get out of prison. His first instinct was that his brother had come up with some kind of "hype" (scheme) which he could work on the penal authorities and would, thus, cause them to release him.<sup>49</sup> This was very puzzling to him and he

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*

didn't know what to do about it. He complied with the instructions and stopped both smoking and eating pork.<sup>50</sup>

Not long after this starting point, Malcolm was transferred to an experimental rehabilitation jail. This was brought about due to the hard work of his sister, Ella, who desired to see him helped.<sup>51</sup> At this prison there were no bars, and the inmates lived in individual houses, fifty men to a house, with each having an individual room. The guards were rather human and not hateful.<sup>52</sup> The entire atmosphere of the prison was calm and on the level of motivation, in a positive sense. That is, the prisoners took an interest in 'intellectual' things . . . "group discussions, debates, and such."<sup>53</sup> The prison had a very large library which Malcolm began to take advantage of. He says he "read aimlessly, until I learned to read selectively, with a purpose."<sup>54</sup>

It wasn't long before his brother Reginald came to see him. It was on this occasion that Reginald told him about Elijah Muhammed. He also told Malcolm about there being a man who knows everything--this man being God. Reginald informed Malcolm that this God's real name was Allah.<sup>55</sup> Reginald went on to tell him that the devil was a man, and that the white man is the devil.<sup>56</sup> Malcolm was not ready to accept this, he tried to think of all the white people he had ever known. He

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

found it quite difficult to see all of them as "devils."<sup>57</sup>

Malcolm's curiosity increased to the point that he became totally involved with Islam and Elijah Muhammed. He corresponded regularly with Elijah Muhammed, and this helped him to learn more about his new-found religion, and became personally known to Elijah Muhammed.<sup>58</sup> By the time Malcolm was ready to leave prison, he had accomplished an abundance of study in the religion of Islam, American history, world history, American literature and philosophy. He was now a true convert to the "Nation of Islam," and a self-educated man.<sup>59</sup>

On his release from prison in the summer of 1952,<sup>60</sup> Malcolm went to Detroit and lived with his brother, Wilfred. He, too, was a follower of Elijah Muhammed.<sup>61</sup> Malcolm became thoroughly involved in the Detroit Muslim Temple and was in attendance at every meeting which took place. He received his name change to "X" from Elijah Muhammed. In the Nation of Islam this meant that he would keep the name "X" until God Himself returned and gave him a holy name from his own mouth.<sup>62</sup>

Malcolm was somewhat disgusted with the small number of people who were taking part in this temple. He became anxious about going "fishing" for new converts.<sup>63</sup> Malcolm was filled with the zeal of a new and true believer, and, thus, he felt others should be given the opportunity to receive this new and meaningful word the same as he had.

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<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 169-191.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*

Certainly they could not deny this as the Black man's natural religion. The going was rough at first. He found it very difficult to get others to come to the Temple. He would get quite a few promises, but very few follow-throughs.<sup>64</sup>

Malcolm continued to study this new religion under his leader and prophet, Elijah Muhammed. Eventually, he informed Elijah that he was interested in working hard at spreading the good news of the Nation of Islam.<sup>65</sup> Shortly thereafter, Elijah Muhammed made Malcolm a Muslim minister.<sup>66</sup>

After becoming a minister, Malcolm began to devote his full time to increasing the numbers in the "Nation." He traveled among the larger cities working diligently at getting temples started.<sup>67</sup> He was very successful and it wasn't too long afterwards that Elijah Muhammed made him his chief assistant.<sup>68</sup>

Malcolm was obviously very effective at convincing Black people in the ghettos of America that Islam was the only true religion for them. He was very astute at being able to give a lucid account of the historic series of dehumanizing acts perpetrated by whites on Blacks. He was continually showing Blacks how they could gain a sense of racial identity and solidarity in the Nation of Islam not possible in Christianity. He taught that Christianity was the religion of the slave-

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<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 200-204.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 211-219.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*

master and it had no real meaning for the slave except to keep him humble and enslaved. The following paragraphs are examples of the ideas Malcolm was teaching:

'Brothers and sisters here for the first time, please don't let that shock you. I know you didn't expect this. Because almost none of us black people have thought that maybe we were making a mistake not wondering if there wasn't a special religion somewhere for us--a special religion of the black man.

'Well, there *is* such a religion. It's called Islam. Let me spell it for you, I-s-l-a-m! *Islam!* But I'm going to tell you about Islam a little later. First, we need to understand some things about this Christianity before we can understand why the *answer* for us is Islam.

'Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're worshipping a Jesus that doesn't even *look* like us! Oh, yes! Now just bear with me, listen to the teachings of the Messenger of Allah, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. Now, just think of this. The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's *his* God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're *dead*, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on *this* earth!

'You don't want to believe what I am telling you, brothers and sisters? Well, I'll tell you what you do. You go out of here, you just take a good look around where you live. Look at not only how *you* live, but look at how anybody that you *know* lives--that way, you'll be sure that you're not just a bad-luck accident. And when you get through looking at where *you* live, then you take you a walk down across Central Park, and start to look at what this white God has brought to the white man. I mean, take yourself a look down there at how the white man is living! 'And don't stop there. In fact, you won't be able to stop for long--his doormen are going to tell you "Move on!" But catch a subway and keep on downtown. Anywhere you may want to get off, *look* at the white man's apartments, businesses! Go right on down to the tip of Manhattan Island that this devilish white man stole from the trusting Indians for twenty-four dollars! Look at his City Hall, down there; look at his Wall Street! Look at yourself! Look at *his* God!'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220.

Malcolm was becoming well-known throughout the Black ghettos of our country. He was speaking a language with which the rejected, frustrated and repressed inhabitant of the ghetto could identify. Not only was he speaking a language with which they could identify, but he was, as well, able to converse at their level. Malcolm's language was the language of survival. Survival in a society which is designed to brutalize, abuse and kill Black people.

The drastic changes which were reflected in the new life of Malcolm X made evident that his new-found religion was *his* salvation as a human being. The Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad put meaning into his life, whereas in the past there had been little, if any, constructive meaning. In this regard, Malcolm said:

The religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been: a dead criminal in a grave, or, if still alive, a flint-hard, bitter, thirty-seven-year-old convict in some penitentiary, or insane asylum. Or, at best, I would have been an old, fading Detroit Red, hustling, stealing enough for food and narcotics, and myself being stalked as prey by cruelly ambitious younger hustlers such as Detroit Red had been.<sup>70</sup>

#### Malcolm X Becomes Popular

In his book, *To Kill A Black Man*, Louis E. Lomax gives detailed information as to the circumstances related to Malcolm's coming to national prominence.<sup>71</sup> Obviously, Lomax is best qualified to give

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>71</sup>Louis E. Lomax, *To Kill A Black Man* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1968), p. 52.



details related to Malcolm's new-found popularity, since he feels that he played a basic part in accomplishing it.<sup>72</sup>

He reports that he was working on the staff of Mike Wallace, well-known T.V. commentator. This was during the spring of 1959. He had recently moved from Chicago to New York and, therefore, was not familiar with what was happening in Harlem.<sup>73</sup> One evening he and a white friend and the friend's white wife visited Harlem. Lomax was caught totally off guard as he and his friends were suddenly thrust into an environment in which Black nationalism was being preached on almost every corner. He says, "Not only did the street corner orators denounce white people, particularly Jews, but Robert and his wife were threatened with physical violence."<sup>74</sup>

Apparently, Lomax was so overwhelmed by this experience that he felt there must be something going on in Harlem which was worth reporting to the public. The next day he reported his new and frightening experience to his immediate superior on Mike Wallace's staff. They in turn gave the information to Mike Wallace, and they agreed that Lomax should get more information on this subject before they could break it to the general public.<sup>75</sup>

On the following Saturday night Lomax took his recorder and went into Harlem to pick up on Black nationalist talk which he had heard the week before. During the midst of this evening he had private talks

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<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

with some of the better-known Black nationalist leaders of Harlem.<sup>76</sup>

In the midst of all this talk Lomax says he "was struck that they consistently referred to 'Brother Malcom X.'"<sup>77</sup> Further investigation revealed that Malcolm was the local leader of the Black Muslims.<sup>78</sup>

This information was not much help to Lomax because he did not know who the Black Muslims were.<sup>79</sup>

The tape that Lomax produced was accepted by Mike Wallace, and they began work on a documentary which was called 'The Hate That Hate Produced.'<sup>80</sup> Lomax worked hard at interviewing various outstanding Black nationalists. Somehow, the name Malcolm X kept echoing itself from the lips of those persons. Lomax was informed by a personal friend, who apparently had knowledge of Malcolm, to have an interview with Malcolm if he wanted a candid picture of Black national activity in Harlem.<sup>81</sup>

Lomax spent several days tracking down Malcolm. A mysterious chain of events finally produced the face-to-face encounter which Lomax was hoping for.<sup>82</sup> During their initial conversation he asked Malcolm for a filmed interview. Immediately Malcolm told him that he could not grant an interview without the permission of Elijah Muhammad. He also said that he would not allow himself to be interviewed by Mike Wallace, whom he considered a white devil.<sup>83</sup> Lomax would have to be the person

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<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*

to interview him. According to Lomax "Malcolm flew to Chicago and convinced Elijah that the interviews would be the best thing that ever happened to the Black Muslim Movement." Elijah granted permission for the interview, and subsequently Lomax interviewed both men and got the opportunity to film a Black Muslim meeting in Washington.<sup>84</sup>

After much hard work and pressure on the T.V. station's owners, the documentary was finally aired. It was run in five parts for five successive nights, one-half hour each night. It was featured as part of Mike Wallace's hour-long newscast.<sup>85</sup>

This was the first time that the Muslims or Malcolm had been revealed to the general public of our country. The following portions of this documentary will serve to give an idea about Malcolm's message at that time--1959:

Wallace: 'Good evening. I'm Mike Wallace. Last week on Newsbeat, our 5:30 news program here on Channel 13, we presented a five-part series, which we called "The Hate That Hate Produced," a study of the rise of Black Racism . . . of a call for Black Supremacy . . . among a small but growing segment of the American Negro population. Tonight, because of the considerable interest evoked by the serialized version, we are repeating this disturbing story, . . .'

'But of even more interest to New Yorkers is Malcolm X, the Muslims' New York minister . . . He is a remarkable man. A man who, by his own admission, was once a procurer and dope peddler. He served time for robbery in the Michigan and Massachusetts State Penitentiaries. But now he is a changed man. He will not smoke or drink. He will not even eat in a restaurant that houses a tavern. He told Newsbeat that his life changed for him when the Muslim faith taught him no longer to be ashamed to be a Black man. Reporter Lomax asked minister Malcolm X to further explain the Muslim teachings of Elijah Muhammad . . .'

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

Lomax: ' . . . that in the same context that Mr. Elijah Muhammad teaches . . . that his faith . . . the Islamic faith is for the Black man and that the Black man is good. He also uses the Old Testament instance of the serpent in Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, and he sets up the proposition that this is the great battle between good and evil, and he uses the word devils.'

Minister X: 'Yes.'

Minister X: 'But as you know, the Bible was written in symbols and parables, and this serpent or snake is a symbol that's used to hide the real identity of the one whom that actually was.'

Lomax: 'Well, who was it?'

Minister X: 'The white man.'

Lomax: 'I want to call your attention, Minister Malcolm, to one paragraph in this column, he says and I quote him, "The only people born of Allah are the Black nation, of whom the so-called American Negroes are descendants."'

Minister X: 'Yes.'

Lomax: 'Now is this your standard teaching?'

Minister X: 'Yes, He teaches us that the Black man is by nature divine.'

Lomax: 'Now, does this mean that the white man by nature is evil?'

Minister X: 'By nature he is evil.'

Lomax: 'Can a white man join your temple?'

Minister X: 'None has ever joined.'

Lomax: 'If one came up and attempted to join would he be allowed to come in and be taught?'

Minister X: 'No, sir.'

Lomax: 'Why not?'

Minister X: 'Well, that's one of the reasons why most people think that Mr. Muhammad teaches hate. But if there is a rattlesnake in the field who has been biting your brothers and your sisters, then you go and tell them that that's a rattlesnake and all of the harm that's ever come to them has come to them from that particular source. Well, then that rattler will think that the warner is teaching hate. He'll go back and tell the other snakes that his man is teaching hate . . . this man is teaching hate . . . but it's not hate . . . it's just that when you study people who have been harmed and discover the source of their injury--the source of all of their defects, and you begin to point out that source, it's not that you hate the source, but your love for your people is so intense--so great--that you must let them know what is wrong with them, what is the cause of their ills. And this is one of the basic factors, I believe, involved, when the propaganda is put out that Mr. Muhammad teaches hate. He teaches Black people to love each other, and our love for each other is so strong, we don't have any room left in our hearts.'<sup>86</sup>

In the preceding statement, Malcolm has demonstrated the rhetoric which serves to give the disinherited--the Black man--a sense of "I am-ness" which is new to his being. In turn, this sense of "I am-ness" becomes related to hope. I contend that it is related to hope because Malcolm X revealed a past and present which dealt with new and different reasons for the status of the Black man. These reasons, though new to the Black man's ear, apparently were creditable for the Black man. Thus, a creditable understanding of his past and present sparked a flame of revolutionary hope in the future.

The following statement, which is a continuation of the Mike Wallace documentary, enhances the idea I am developing, as related to what informed Malcolm's revolutionary hope:

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65-74.

. . . Minister X: 'Who is his enemy? He'll say the Belgian. Ask the man in Kenya, who is the enemy, he'll say the British. Ask the man in Morocco, who is the enemy, he'll say the French. But the one thing that the French and the British and the Belgians all have in common--they're all from Europe. How could so few white people rule so many Black people? This is the thing you should want to know. How could so few? The white man today will tell you that thousands of years ago the Black man in Africa was living in palaces, the Black man in Africa was wearing silk, the Black man in Africa was cooking and seasoning his food, the Black man in Africa has mastered the arts and the sciences . . . he knew the course of the stars and the universe before the man up in Europe knew that the earth wasn't flat. Is that right or wrong? Then, if the Black man in Africa had reached such a high state of civilization so long ago, at a time when the people of Europe were crawling on their all fours, what happened to make these people or enable these people to come out of the caves and come down into our civilization and take it over and hitch us to the plow--what happened? How did they do it? These are the things you should want to find out before you say hurray, hurray, hurray. Is that right or wrong?'<sup>87</sup>

Malcolm's message seems to say, "Now that you know who you are," "now that you know who your enemy is"; "you have hope in the future." It naturally follows that in this case the hope is a revolutionary hope, which demands that this "new Black man" get busy and act to usher in that new future.

Subsequent events make evident that this documentary did much to advance the popularity of the Muslim Movement in America. The documentary not only advanced the popularity of the Muslim Movement, it catapulted Malcolm X into the national and international spotlight, virtually overnight.

Two other events stand out as significant in giving popularity to Malcolm X and the Muslims. First, Dr. C. Eric Lincoln wrote his

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<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

doctoral thesis as an in-depth analysis and study of the Muslims.

According to Lomax, Lincoln's was the first "scholarly analysis of the Black Muslim Movement."<sup>88</sup> Dr. Lincoln entitled his study, "The Black

Muslims in America." The study turned out to be a book with the same title, *Black Muslims in America*.<sup>89</sup> The book came out in 1961, and is

now in its tenth printing. Obviously, it is a very widely-read book.<sup>90</sup>

Secondly, in 1962, the Muslims in Los Angeles became involved in a gun battle with the police. One Muslim was killed and several others

wounded.<sup>91</sup> I recall that Malcolm came into town and took part in con-

demning the Los Angeles Police Department for their brutal and unwar-

ranted actions. Malcolm was before the T.V. cameras for interview after

interview. Each time I heard him, he was lambasting white society and

the white man for his continued brutalization and dehumanization of

Black people. At the same time he was building up the Black man's

hopes, in that he referred to the ever-impending demise of the white

man and his reign on earth. Malcolm came across as a strong and deter-

mined Black man. Sometimes it seemed as if he were about to attack his

interviewer. I am sure that the kind of news coverage this incident

received and Malcolm's subsequent involvement therein boosted his popu-

larity beyond measurable proportions.

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<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.* C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), title page.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, copyright page.

<sup>91</sup>Lomax, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

Malcolm's Break with Elijah Muhammad

Malcolm's increased popularity in the nation and world created quite a demand for his services as a lecturer and speaker. Malcolm was a faithful student of Elijah's, and everywhere he went he made sure that he gave honor and recognition to his teacher, Elijah Muhammad. Few teachers have had faithful and devoted students such as Malcolm was to Elijah Muhammad.

In 1963, Malcolm was riding an overwhelming crest of popularity, but he was becoming unhappy about the restraints which were placed upon all Black Muslims in America by Muhammad. He restrained them from taking part in the action phase of the swiftly-changing Black movement in America. Malcolm was later to tell Louis Lomax, Elijah . . . "was 'all breath and no britches,' . . . Muhammad did not have the guts to back his gospel with steel."<sup>92</sup>

Malcolm was getting a little disgusted because the non-violent movement had people out in the streets and acting, and Malcolm was talking bad to white people and doing nothing about it. Other things were happening within the Muslim organization which seemed to be pointed at eliminating Malcolm. It may be that he was getting too powerful, and therefore, some important Muslims may have feared he would eventually take over the movement. Apparently, Muhammad was one of those who was somewhat leary of Malcolm's future motives.

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<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 97.



As events would have it, the opportunity for Elijah to silence Malcolm came along late in 1963. In November, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. After the assassination Elijah passed the word to all of his ministers to say nothing about the assassination. This word applied to Malcolm, along with all the other Muslim ministers.

In a mass meeting, which had been planned long before the assassination, Malcolm was faithful in not referring to the then-recent Kennedy assassination.<sup>93</sup> However, when the question-and-answer period came at the close of his talk, one of the first questions put to him was in reference to his opinion of the Kennedy assassination. He was asked to comment on it.<sup>94</sup> To be sure, Malcolm sought to deal with the question. According to Lomax, the word-for-word transcript of Malcolm's reply isn't published. However, subsequent reports indicate that Malcolm said the assassination of Kennedy was nothing more than 'the chickens have come home to roost.'<sup>95</sup> The national press picked up Malcolm's statement and presented it as a repugnant statement, which was to be deplored by the general public. The inevitable results of Malcolm's statement came crushing in on him. He was suspended by Elijah Muhammad. There is much speculation and conjecture as to the real reason why Muhammad silenced Malcolm. But for Elijah, Malcolm's statement was the reason. Malcolm accepted his suspension with all the respect and faithfulness he could muster.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>Haley, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

Malcolm's understanding was that the suspension was for ninety days and then he would be reinstated. History reveals that Malcolm's understanding was not accurate. It became clear to Malcolm that he was not going to be reinstated, so in March, 1964, he pulled out of the Muslim movement.

Attempting to ferret out Malcolm's real reasons for leaving produces several impressions. To be sure, Malcolm may have come to realize that his effectiveness as a Muslim leader was shot, meaning, as well, that his power to influence people was dissipated. Malcolm may have come to the conclusion that he wanted to be involved in the action phase of the Black man's fight for freedom. Maybe Malcolm wanted to become *his* own man. The fact remains, Malcolm did pull out of the Black Muslims. His pull out meant a severance of relationship with his teacher and leader, Muhammad.

How should I evaluate the split with Elijah? I view Malcolm's break as a very positive step in the right direction. Without a doubt, Malcolm had previously given all his allegiance to Elijah and his organization. I am certain this hindered his effectiveness with the masses of the Black people he was trying to reach. Indeed, many Blacks viewed Malcolm's religious involvement as nothing more than one of those mystical cultic affairs that feed off of the weak and poor Black people. The white press and others had somewhat convinced the public that the form of Muslimity being presented by Elijah Muhammad was a perverted and impure form. It seems that Malcolm also had felt this but never expressed it.

Malcolm On His Own

Malcolm's break with Elijah Muhammad did not slow his pace in the fight for the rights of Black people in America. As a matter of fact, he seems to have increased his pace. The same time he announced his break with Muhammed and the Black Muslims, he announced the formation of his own organization, the 'Muslim Mosque, Inc.'<sup>97</sup> Malcolm intended his new Mosque to . . . "give us a religious base, and the spiritual force necessary to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community."<sup>98</sup> He viewed the Mosque as . . . 'the working base for an action program designed to eliminate the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and the social degradation suffered daily by twenty-two million Afro-Americans.'<sup>99</sup>

My strong impression is that Malcolm began to make his most significant contribution to the liberation of Black people in America during the one year he lived, after his break with Muhammad. All of a sudden, Malcolm was now his own man. To be sure, being his own man meant that he would be out among his people seeking to direct them in activities which would bring about changes in the oppressive way of life which they experienced.

A few days after the formation of his new organization, Malcolm was invited to speak in Cleveland on a symposium entitled 'The Negro

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<sup>97</sup>Lomax, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>98</sup>Haley, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*

Revolt--What Comes Next?' The date of this meeting was April 3, 1964.<sup>100</sup> In this speech, Malcolm laid out his new agenda for action in the midst of the struggle for the liberation of Black people in America. I view this speech as one of Malcolm's most profound contributions to the rhetoric of the movement. I also rate this speech as one which reveals his revolutionary hope. Malcolm titled this speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet."<sup>101</sup>

Initially, Malcolm sets out to clarify his position in terms of the movement and his involvement therein. He informs his audience that he is still a Muslim, but this is his religion, just as Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others have their religion and also fight for the rights of Black people. In this first part of his speech Malcolm makes a call to unity to all those who differ. He says,

I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem--a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you're educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you're going to catch hell just like I am. We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same hell from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us suffer here in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.<sup>102</sup>

Immediately following the above statement Malcolm says something,

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<sup>100</sup>George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 23.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

which, to my knowledge, he never said before--or at least, he never took the time to express this feeling while attempting to make another more important point. Malcolm says, "Now in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression."<sup>103</sup>

In very prophetic style, Malcolm projects his feelings about what will happen in America in 1964. I refer to prophetic style, because future events came about as Malcolm had predicted. It was in the summer of 1964, in Rochester, New York, that the first racial explosion took place. That is, the first racial explosion of any consequences initiated by Black people. In what I call his prophecy, Malcolm says,

If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out--time has run out! 1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed. The most explosive year. Why? It's also a political year. It's the year when all of the white politicians will be back in the so-called Negro community jiving you and me for some votes. The year when all of the white political crooks will be right back in your and my community with their false promises, building up our hopes for a letdown, with their trickery and their treachery, with their false promises which they don't intend to keep. As they nourish these dissatisfactions, it can only lead to one thing, an explosion; and now we have the type of Black man on the scene in America today . . . who just doesn't intend to turn the other cheek any longer.<sup>104</sup>

In the latter part of his statement, Malcolm informs his audience about the new Black man; and, at the same time, he is projecting a new

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

and revolutionary kind of action for Black people. By implication, he is saying that when the oppressed Blacks become aware of the effectiveness of the new Black man's tactic, they will gain faith in his revolutionary message of hope. They will seek to make their hope for the future a reality in the present time. Evidence for the validity of this statement can be found in the history of race relations in this country for the last five years. We have seen the Watts riots, the Detroit and Newark riots and numerous rebellions from city to city across this nation. I don't wish to imply that Malcolm was the sole motivating force for the actions, but I am certain that Malcolm's message was the spark which lighted the fuse from Black ghetto to Black ghetto across this country. Surely, Malcolm's message was on the lips of young and old alike, especially those who were fed up with their brutish living conditions, and had acquired faith in his message so as to be inspired toward revolutionary hope.

In this speech "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm's description of the past and present conditions of Black people in America, in relation to the government, is somewhere close to being very accurate. In this regard, Malcolm says,

The Dixiecrats in Washington, D.C., control the key committees that run the government. The only reason the Dixiecrats control these committees is because they have seniority. The only reason they have seniority is because they come from states where Negroes can't vote. This is not even a government that's based on democracy. It is not a government that is made up of representatives of the people. Half of the people in the South can't even vote. Eastland is not even supposed to be in Washington. Half of the

senators and congressmen who occupy these key positions in Washington, D.C., are there illegally, are there unconstitutionally.<sup>105</sup>

It is the above kind of information which began to awaken a goodly number of Black people to the trickery of which they are the victims. This kind of awareness implies another step. Malcolm proposes that step in one of two ways, in "The Ballot or the Bullet." He says:

' . . . in 1964, it's time now for you and me to become more politically mature and realize what the ballot is for; what we're supposed to get when we cast a ballot; and that if we don't cast a ballot, it's going to end up in a situation where we're going to have to cast a bullet. It's either a ballot or a bullet.'<sup>106</sup>

Malcolm attempted to touch all the bases in this speech. That is, he sought to deal with all those forces which were coming to bear upon Black people in America, specifically, those forces which had been and still were exploitive and oppressive. He spoke about the historic investment our mothers and fathers have made in America for us. He said,

Your and my mother and father, who didn't work an eight-hour shift, but worked from 'can't see' in the morning until 'can't see' at night, and worked for nothing, making the white man rich, making Uncle Sam rich. This is our investment. This is our contribution--our blood. Not only did we give of our blood. Every time he had a call to arms, we were the first ones in uniform. We died on every battlefield the white man had. We have made a greater sacrifice than anybody who's standing up in America today. We have rights, for whose philosophy is black nationalism, means: 'give it to us now. Don't wait for next year. Give it to us yesterday, and that's not fast enough.'<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

In the above statements, Malcolm uses history as a means to inspire Black people to seek changes for themselves, both in the present and the future. Malcolm's continuous recital of past and present indignities and inequities which are directed toward Black people, tends to instill in the listener as well as the reader an immediate motivation to demand change by using either the ballot or the bullet.

In this speech Malcolm displays his uncanny ability to identify with those who are at the bottom of the social strata in America. As a prophet of social justice he thus identifies with those who are most in need of justice in this society. In an aside, but a very poignant statement, Malcolm speaks in reference to his concern for the little man. He says,

. . . I deal with small people. I find you get a whole lot of small people and whip hell out of a whole lot of big people. They haven't got anything to lose, and they've got everything to gain. And they'll let you know in a minute. It takes two to tango; when I go, you go.<sup>108</sup>

At this point, Malcolm also seems to be attempting to give the little man a sense of affirmation. Thus, if the little man really has felt this way in the past, he now has a mandate to act in the present.

Malcolm sought to give his listeners confidence in the legitimacy of their demands. He accomplished this by turning the oppressor's document of control on the oppressor. The document I refer to is the United States Constitution. In this regard, he says,

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<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.



. . . whenever you're going after something that belongs to you, anyone who's depriving you of the right to have it is a criminal. Understand that. Whenever you are going after something that is yours, you are within your legal rights to lay claim to it. And anyone who puts forth any effort to deprive you of that which is yours, is breaking the law, is a criminal. And this was pointed out by the Supreme Court decision. It outlawed segregation. Which means segregation is against the law. Which means a segregationist is breaking the law. You can't label him anything other than that, and when you demonstrate against segregation, the law is on your side. The Supreme Court is on your side.<sup>109</sup>

Indeed, this recognition of the Supreme Court was exceptional for Malcolm. To be sure, in the past he would have condemned the courts, because they are white-dominated courts. Apparently, Malcolm was attempting to show himself as willing to become a part of the overall Black movement in America.

In the last part of this speech, Malcolm introduces two inter-related ideas. First, he suggests that Black people stop looking at their struggle as just a civil rights struggle. Rather, Blacks should look at the struggle or expand the struggle to the level of human rights.<sup>110</sup> He reasons that the civil rights struggle is confined to the " . . . jurisdiction of Uncle Sam."<sup>111</sup> Whereas, the human rights struggle is a matter of concern for nations of the world.<sup>112</sup> Secondly, Malcolm indicates that, if we accept human rights as a new level of the struggle, we will then be able to take the United States before the world court--the United Nations.<sup>113</sup> In support of this idea, Malcolm says,

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<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

. . . the United Nations has what's known as the charter of human rights, it has a committee that deals in human rights. You may wonder why all of the atrocities that have been committed in Africa and in Hungary and in Asia and in Latin America are brought before the United Nations, and the Negro problem is never brought before the United Nations. This is part of the conspiracy . . .<sup>114</sup>

Even more emphatically, Malcolm refers to this matter of human rights and the United Nations:

Human rights are the rights that are recognized by all nations of this earth. And any time any one violates your human rights, you can take them to the world court. Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the Black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite. He has the audacity--yes, he has--imagine him posing as the leader of the free world. The free world!--and you over here singing 'We Shall Overcome.' Expand the civil rights struggle to the level of human rights, take it into the United Nations, where our African brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Asian brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Latin-American brothers can throw their weight on our side, and where 800 million Chinamen are sitting there waiting to throw their weight on our side.<sup>115</sup>

At this point, one can begin to see Malcolm's initial designs on internationalizing the Black struggle. Future events related to Malcolm give rise to conjecture; it seems Malcolm was aware of the direction in which he wished to move the Black struggle in America. The events to which I refer are the extended trips he took to Asia and Africa. These trips took place shortly after this speech.

One trip which is often highlighted is Malcolm's first extended travel out of the United States. This trip began April 13, 1964. He visited Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco and

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Algeria.<sup>116</sup> The most significant portion of this trip, as reported by him, was his pilgrimage to Mecca. To be sure, it must have been a significant portion of his trip, because he placed great emphasis on it after he returned to this country.

This pilgrimage was credited with changing Malcolm's ideas, in a positive manner, about the ability of Blacks and whites to get along, in America, as brothers. On his arrival back in the United States, he was questioned by reporters as to the truth of this rumor. He said,

My pilgrimage broadened my scope. It blessed me with a new insight. In two weeks in the Holy Land, I saw what I never had seen in thirty-nine years here in America. I saw all *races*, all *colors*,--blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans--in true brotherhood! In unity! Living as one! Worshipping as one! No segregationist--no liberals; they would not have known how to interpret the meaning of those words. In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of all white people. I never will be guilty of that again--as I know now that some white people are truly sincere, that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man. The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is as wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks. Yes, I have been convinced that *some* American whites do want to help cure the rampant racism which is on the path to *destroying* this country.<sup>117</sup>

Malcolm continued his response to the reporters by admitting to his change of attitude. He said:

It was in the Holy World that my attitude was changed, by what I experienced there, and by what I witnessed there, in terms of brotherhood--not just brotherhood toward me, but brotherhood between all men, of all nationalities and complexions, who were there. And now that I am back in America, my attitude here

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>117</sup> Haley, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

concerning white people has to be governed by what my black brothers and I experience here, and what we witness here--in terms of brotherhood . . .<sup>118</sup>

The implication of the latter statement is that the Black man in America is forced to respond to white people according to the manner in which they treat him. Thus, Malcolm is leaving room for an appropriate response behavior which may not be actualized as forbearance and brotherly affection, but may instead be actualized as violent aggression.

With this broadened scope, Malcolm spent a great deal of time trying to build an organization. However, the new Malcolm was rejected by both the white press and moderate Black leadership. Malcolm indicated:

One of the major troubles that I was having in building the organization that I wanted--an all-Black organization whose ultimate objective was to help create a society in which there could exist honest white-Black brotherhood--was that my earlier public image, my so-called 'Black Muslim' image, kept blocking me. I was trying to gradually reshape that image. I was trying to turn a corner, into a new regard by the public, especially Negroes . . .<sup>119</sup>

Malcolm was concerned that American Blacks would begin to see their struggle for human rights in a different light. His desire was to get American Blacks to realize that they were not in the minority, but as a matter of fact, they were members of a worldwide majority.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>120</sup> George Breitman, *The Last Year of Malcolm X* (New York: Schocken, 1967), p. 42.

Malcolm was a very busy man the last year of his life. He made several trips abroad, and he was busy speaking here and there. His attempt to get his organization for Afro-American unity going was somewhat slow. Malcolm didn't realize that American Blacks were not ready to relate to such a movement since they still had so many problems to deal with here at home. And his new organization didn't present an alternative worthy of mass support.

Malcolm X was assassinated February 21, 1965, in New York City during one of his weekly rallies.<sup>121</sup> Thus, less than one year from the time he broke away from Elijah Muhammad, his life was ended. Even though his life is ended, his story lingers on.

Malcolm was a Black American freedom fighter. He was one of the few who stood up to white America and told it how much it stunk, and at the same time threatened to bring violent action against it to change it. Malcolm's ideas seemed to be in a state of crisis most of the time. He was always shaping and reshaping his ideas. One day he was a Black nationalist, the next day he was an internationalist concerned about human rights. One day he was a militant fighter for freedom, justice and equality for Black Americans, the next day he was giving the traditional civil rights leaders hell for their love of the American system.

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<sup>121</sup>Earl Grant, "The Last Days of Malcolm X," in John Henrik Clarke, (ed.) *Malcolm X, the Man and His Times* (New York: Collier, 1969), pp. 92-97.

I have attempted to analyze his message and his actions in order to determine what informed his hope. I have attempted to discover how such a complex personality was able to give hope to America's deprived Blacks, who for the most part had lost faith in non-violence as a method for bringing about social change.

In the following chapter, I will compare the Christian message of Martin Luther King, Jr., which was, I contend, a message of hope, with Malcolm X's revolutionary message, which was, as well, a message of hope.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHRISTIAN HOPE AND REVOLUTIONARY HOPE

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s approach to the liberation of Black people in America was considerably different from that of Malcolm X. On the one hand, King's approach was based on an appeal to mass demonstration and civil disobedience; the non-violent approach. And on the other hand, Malcolm's approach was based on an appeal to retaliatory self-defense and "by any means necessary," considered to be the violent approach. Let me clarify what I mean by their approach. My use of the term "approach" refers to their messages, as well as their actions.

In this portion of study I will compare both messages of hope, seeking to determine whether or not a revolutionary message has the potential to grip and motivate people to action more than a particularly Christian message. Secondly, I will indicate what I see as similar in these two liberator's experiences as they relate to the struggle in which they were engaged.

#### Messages of Hope Compared

Essentially, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., were both concerned about obtaining justice, equality and freedom for Black people in the United States. They both were aware of the vicious economic exploitation which is so destructive to Black families. They were both aware of the oppressive and powerful political system which so often ignored the rights of Black people. However, King considered it proper

for Black people to work within the framework of the system and seek to bring about changes therein. Whereas, Malcolm was more concerned about either separating from the system or destroying it. At least, this was Malcolm's earlier opinion. Later in his life, he seemed to feel that Black people should fight within the system, and seek to make it work for them rather than against them.

Both Malcolm and Martin brought a message to their people which moved them to action. We can say most assuredly that Martin's message did move people to act, as evidenced by the many non-violent demonstrations he led.

It is my contention that any time a message moves people to act in their own behalf, especially in the face of awesome odds, that message is a message of hope. A message of hope must predict a desired future, but it must also give directions for achieving that future. A message of hope must contain an element of change which can be brought about through an actualizing process. That is, the more I seek to achieve my goal, by the sweat of my brow, the more that goal becomes actualized. In other words, I can see the candle light of my desired future looming brighter and brighter at the other end of the tunnel of hope and I move closer and closer to it. I am getting closer to it through my own efforts.

When King admonished his people in Montgomery and other places to "do good to them that despitefully use you," "love your enemies," and "walk together children don't get weary," he was speaking out of a Christian context with which they were familiar. Nevertheless, his



message would have meant nothing if the people had not perceived themselves as working in their own behalf to bring about their future. Immediately, they were given hope because King was brave enough to delineate the evils of the system of segregation and its violation of God's will. Actualizing of their future was being ushered along by the newly-stayed hand of their white oppressors. Thus, they were thoroughly convinced that God *was* on their side in this existential confrontation, and not "in the sky" and "bye and bye."

We can be somewhat certain that Malcolm's message motivated people to action, but we cannot document this as we can with King. Malcolm never led a violent demonstration anywhere. He only declared the necessity to respond violently to violence. However, we do know that young Blacks, particularly in the Northern ghettos, looked upon him as their hero. We also know that, wherever he went, he attracted a large following. We know that his predictions about racial violence were actualized many times over. So, we can determine one of two things. Either he was a phenomenal soothsayer who could interpret the signs of the times, or his message motivated a certain segment of the Black population to stand up as men and retaliate to the violence of a racist system with violence.

Malcolm was keenly aware of the necessity to have Black people be aware of the reasons why they should react violently. In fact, he was able to convince them that Almighty God and the United States government could not reject their actions. Through his continuous uncovering of fact after fact related to the historic reasons for Black

people's miserable existence, he was able to motivate in some of them a desire to act against those who were at fault for their condition. Thus, once the desire to act was there, we can readily conclude that hope was there. I call it a revolutionary kind of hope because he called for revolutionary kinds of tactics. Speaking on revolution in his "message to the grass roots" Malcolm said, "Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution over- turns and destroys everything that gets in its way."<sup>1</sup> Even though he did not spell out his tactics, he points to them in this description of revolution.

The effectiveness of Malcolm and Martin is tied to their images just as much as it is to their messages. That is, their followers maintained an image of them which was hope-inspiring. To be sure, they were a part of their message. To the Southern Blacks, King's image was that of a new Moses who was ordained and elected by God to set oppressed Black people free. Indeed, their hope was a Christian hope, because it was rooted in the Christian tradition and nurtured in the context of the Christian church.

Malcolm's image was especially appealing to Northern ghettoized Black people. In a Christian context, we might refer to him as a Joshua. But in the context of his existential experience, he was viewed as a proud Black man who was willing to die fighting for his, as well

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<sup>1</sup>George Breitman, (ed.) *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 9.

as his people's, rights. Wyatt Tee Walker writes, " . . . Malcolm represented a newly-found assertiveness that had lain dormant too long in the minds of men of color."<sup>2</sup> Another factor related to the hope inspired by his image is alluded to by Walker. He writes:

Malcolm 'brought whitey down front' and men who had cowered inwardly and outwardly in the presence of the nameless white face in whose world he moved admired his spunk and grit. Vicariously through him, some Negro men got up off their knees for the first time in their lives and touched their manhood as if it were a new Christmas toy.<sup>3</sup>

Malcolm and Martin *lived* their message, *believed* in, and were *willing to die* for it, and eventually died *because* of it. Apparently, it was assumed that by killing Malcolm and Martin, the hopes of Black people would die with them. Obviously, they were not aware that a man's physical image is only a grotesque symbol of what he really is. *All* we know and feel about a person who is removed from our midst by death, we can always know and feel.

King's Christian concern for overcoming evil with good seemed to be heavily paled by Malcolm's cry for responding to evil "by any means necessary." Malcolm usually placed emphasis in destroying the evil-doer along with the evil. Indeed, Malcolm's way short-circuited any appeal to love other than love of self and kind. Howard Thurman somewhat supports Malcolm's approach toward the oppressor or the one who is perpetrating evil against his people in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

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<sup>2</sup>Wyatt T. Walker, "Nothing but a Man," in John Henrik Clarke, (ed.) *Malcolm X, The Man and His Times* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

He writes, "The oppressed can give themselves over with utter enthusiasm to life-affirming attitudes toward their fellow sufferers, and this becomes compensation for their life-negating attitude toward the strong."<sup>4</sup>

King's message was concerned with instilling in Black people a profound sense of personal worth and dignity. My view is that King believed one gained a sense of personal worth and dignity on the basis of performing as a superhuman individual. Therefore, when one is confronted by the indignities of his oppressor, he is able to transcend this existential situation, because his interest is in the ultimacy of personal worth and dignity. For King, the only way one can demonstrate his personal worth and dignity is to refuse to stoop so low as to repay indignity for indignity.

Malcolm concluded that personal worth and dignity could be gained by one's willingness to say *no* to the indignities foisted upon him by his oppressor. In addition to the verbalized *no*, he must be ready and willing to enforce a physical *no*, by any means necessary.

I am thoroughly convinced that Malcolm and Martin presented messages which were needed for our times and in the places where they were best accepted. King inspired a hope in people who were primarily within the context of the Christian church, and, as well, those persons who were middle-class oriented. His message was meaningful to those

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<sup>4</sup>Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), p. 85.

who felt they had a stake in the future of American society, who desired to see that future arrive without bloodshed. The people who derived hope from King's approach were satisfied that, at that time, the Southern whites would not respond favorably to a more violent approach.

Malcolm X's message appealed primarily to those persons who were accustomed to a brutal way of life. His message was welcomed by those persons who expressed themselves best by using violence. Malcolm aroused in Black ghetto dwellers the courage to do that which they had always wanted to do, but just couldn't muster the nerve. Malcolm's view of man was the Anglo-European view, meaning that a man must stand and fight for what he feels belongs to him as a human being. A man must retaliate when he is attacked.

Does a revolutionary message have the potential to motivate oppressed people to action more than a particularly Christian message? On the basis of my comparison, I find that the revolutionary message has the broadest appeal. It has the broadest appeal because it forces one to examine his existential situation for what it is. That is, for what he is presently experiencing. It demands that one deal with this situation on the basis of the facts as they confront him. It does not demand that one appeal to some higher guaranteed ethical guides. It does not demand that one love his enemy, nor does it demand that one respond with behavior which a culture does not recognize. Ethics become situational and, for the most part, meets the needs of the time.

In a society where people have received a childhood theology which spoke of God as good, and the present theology speaks of God as dead, God has little or no meaning. This kind of God has no meaning for a Black person who is being beaten over the head and brutalized by a white policeman just because he's Black. This kind of God has no meaning for people who are hungry and without work, and see affluence all about them. Hanging onto their childhood theology, they see this God as the Christian's God, so they in turn reject the Christian way of obtaining freedom, justice and equality. They, in fact, embrace and see a ray of hope in the revolutionary message. Thus, we see the effective appeal of Malcolm X's revolutionary message and the hope it created.

#### Similarities in These Two Liberators

Even though their messages were quite different and their tactics appealed primarily to two different segments of the Black population, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were both concerned about gaining an ultimate goal: freedom, justice and equality for Black people in America. Malcolm and Martin were acutely aware that they were "singing Zion's songs in a strange land." Their intention was to wake up that strange land--America--to her consciousness of the basic worth of all human beings. Malcolm wished to stab her awake and Martin wished to nudge her awake.

In this section of the study, I will describe what I perceive as similarities in these two liberators. Sometimes, similarities are hard

to see, because we have been programmed to see Malcolm and Martin as opposites. The programming has come about as a result of the mass media's conscious efforts to influence our thoughts and impressions. We *must* admit that much of what we know and feel about these two men has come to us from the mass media. I hasten to add my apologies to the reader who feels personally familiar with the lives of these men on the basis of his independent research.

Malcolm and Martin were both American-born citizens. They were products of the same period of history. There was little less than four years difference in their ages, Malcolm being older. Amazingly enough, they both died at the young age of 39 by the blast of an assassin's bullet.

Malcolm and Martin were sons of Baptist preachers. Being sons of Baptist preachers means that, for a certain portion of both of their lives, they were exposed to Christian teachings and Christian living. Their fathers were industrious, self-respecting Black men who never accepted segregation and insult as a way of life for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, Malcolm's father was killed for his refusal to accept the indignities of segregation and discrimination. After that murder, we see the lives of Malcolm and Martin going in opposite directions. Until we pick them up as public figures working for the liberation of Black people, the only thing similar about them is that they survived until they could begin to be known and heard. Nevertheless, one thing is for sure, they both received an education. Malcolm in the college of "hard knocks" and Martin in the renown

academic institutions of the United States. However, our primary concern is with the similarities in their lives as public figures.

Malcolm and Martin were blessed with the ability to put into ordered speech the muted desires and ambitions of Black people in America. They were able to speak clearly to the oppressed people so that they would be moved to action. Their ability to speak in such a manner is truly the unique genius of all great revolutionary leaders. Martin used the vernacular of the Black church as well as middle-class educated society. Malcolm X talked the language everyone could understand. He sought to make things plain and simple. Malcolm spoke the language of the ghetto.

As a result of their being able to voice the mood and the sentiments of their people, they were able to gain their confidence. Once they gained their confidence, they were able to influence their ideas. Their rhetoric was an inspiration to their followers and it increased their power among them.

In their particular settings, Malcolm and Martin were heroes. They were the first Black men that millions of Black Americans heard stand and confront the white man and his racist system. They were the first Black men the masses heard and saw refuse to bow and be crushed by the awesome power of white America. They defied the white man's traditions and rules: Martin with his actions and Malcolm with his verbalized threats and biting indictments.

Essentially, Malcolm and Martin attempted to indict America for its refusal to take its foot off the Black man's head. They both



sought to embarrass and expose America to the world. They seemed to want to say to the world that America, the supposed bastion of freedom, is merely a den of oppression and race hate.

Their persistent stand before the awesome and devastating power which could be brought down on them at a moment's notice; their consistent exposure of much of white America for what it really was; the strength of manhood and power which they exuded through their speech and actions, woke Black people up to a new sense of their own humanity. Black people became aware of their own worth. Malcolm and Martin knew that when Black people became aware of their own humanity and worth, they would begin to gain a sense of unity and solidarity. They both pushed for this unity and solidarity. Malcolm pushed for it through the Muslim religion and later through Black nationalism, and still later, through internationalism. Martin pushed for it through his brotherhood and love theme, his mass action movement.

Malcolm and Martin were symbols of hope to their people. They were symbols of hope because they seemed to be where the masses of Black people desired to be. That is, they had somehow transcended the muck and mire of racial injustice and were on the high road of destiny. They were already travelling the road of equality, and were aware of their humanity. To their respective followers, they were paragons of dignity, pride and self-worth. Eldridge Cleaver writes of Malcolm in his book, *Soul on Ice*, " . . . he was a symbol of hope, a model for

thousands of Black convicts . . ."<sup>5</sup> So, even to the Black prisoner, Malcolm was a symbol of hope. Eldridge apparently considered Martin a symbol of hope as well, for he writes in his book, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, "The assassin's bullet not only killed Dr. King, it killed a period of history. It killed a *hope*, and it killed a dream."<sup>6</sup> Though I don't agree that Martin's assassination killed a hope, my desire here is to show how one man, who is truly revolutionary, perceived both Malcolm and Martin as symbols of hope.

Malcolm and Martin were labeled as "outside agitators" and "disturbers of the peace." However, if we take a hard look at what these labels really mean, we might conclude that they were disturbing the white man's peace. They were disturbing a history; they were disturbing a system which said, "Nigger, no," "White man, yes." To be sure, they were considered "outsiders" only when they disturbed the white man's peace. Their refusal to buckle under in the face of these indictments gave strength to their cause and filled the Black man's abyss of despair with a cushion of hope.

Malcolm and Martin were able to withstand the epithets, indictments, the name calling, and the threats which were directed at them because their appeal was not to man, but to that which transcends man. Their appeal was not to the laws of man, but to the laws of God. They

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<sup>5</sup>Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 58.

<sup>6</sup>Eldridge Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 74.

interpreted the law of God as being for those who are oppressed, burdened and heavy-ladened.

There was an essential commonality about Malcolm and Martin which made their message so meaningful as well as acceptable to the masses of Black people in America. Indeed, they were both products of the same Black experience. They both knew something about the indignities of segregation. They had both encountered the high-sign "Nigger, No!" They knew about the long history of oppression which was a part of their heritage and they had learned to survive in a world in which most of what they encountered was a rejection of their humanity. They were a part of that Black experience which causes one to smile when he is hurt through and through by some racial indignity. They knew what it was like to be the invisible man in a society which refuses to recognize your manhood.

They were aware of an experience which either made one wholly religious or religiously sinful. They knew the price a Black man must pay in America if he stood up and demanded justice, equality and freedom. They were willing to pay that price, because it is a legitimate part of the Black experience in America. As well, it is a legitimate expression of hope in the future. Thus, they were not afraid to fight boldly and to seek to inspire others to fight bravely for what is theirs in the sight of man and God.

As we look at these two liberators, these two prophets of justice, we raise the question: What was their source of strength? Their source of strength was bound up in their perception of hope. Their perception

of hope was that God's justice would become a reality in behalf of their oppressed brothers. To be sure, they were convinced that God's promise for the future implied renunciation of the present.

## CHAPTER V

### HOPE--THE LIBERATING THEOLOGY

In Chapter I of this study, I suggested that neither Malcolm nor Martin acted solely from a theological stance. Nevertheless, I recognized the fact that they were tremendously influenced by their respective religious traditions. I also indicated that an analysis of their messages and actions would probably reflect a theology which was the underlying rationale for their liberating activities, and as well, informed their strong hope for liberation.

In the succeeding chapters, I pointed to some of their liberating activities. At the same time, I attempted to explicate their messages and activities in terms of their ability to inspire masses of oppressed Black people to realize a meaningful hope. In so doing, I described Martin as the purveyor of a Christian message of hope and Malcolm as the purveyor of a revolutionary message of hope. Subsequently, I began to refer to their ideas in the categories of: Christian hope and Revolutionary hope.

In this chapter, I will summarize the meaning of Malcolm's and Martin's messages and actions as they relate to ideas of God and man. I will also suggest how I see the meaning of their messages as related to the idea of a liberating theology and/or a theology of hope.

James Baldwin, novelist and polemicist of the American racial scene, writes in his book, *The Fire Next Time*, "If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer,

and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."<sup>1</sup>

As I perceive it, the liberation struggle of oppressed people, implies an understanding of God and his activity as related to them. Therefore, when we apply Baldwin's statement to the struggles of oppressed Black people in America we find that their concept of God suggests the notion that God is for justice and therefore he is working in their behalf. Surely, they will get rid of God if he is not perceived as acting in their behalf.

We can detect this kind of understanding of God's activity in the messages and actions of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. They were certain that they experienced God in the midst of their liberating activities. Nevertheless, we must seek to understand the way in which they experienced God's acting on behalf of their cause. In short, we are saying, we must look at Malcolm's and Martin's understanding of God as related to their own liberating activity.

In his article "Islam as a Pastoral in the Life of Malcolm X," former editor of the Arab Journal, Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri writes concerning Malcolm's understanding of God out of his Islamic tradition minus its American distortion.<sup>2</sup> Elmessiri writes,

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<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, "Islam as a Pastoral in the Life of Malcolm X," in John Henrix Clarke (ed.) *Malcolm X, the Man and His Times* (New York: Collier, 1969), p. 69.

Malcolm, . . . discovered the egalitarianism and universalism of Allah. God . . . Allah remains free from human prejudices and false distinctions. He is the God of all people, in all places, and of all colors.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Malcolm's view of God is understood as a demand for the equality of man. This equality of man is made evident by Malcolm insofar as he calls for equal justice and insofar as he demands reciprocal justice. Malcolm made evident his feelings on this issue of reciprocal justice when he said,

Anytime you know you are within the law, within your legal rights, within your moral rights, in accord with justice, then die for what you believe in. But don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality. What's good for the goose is good for the gander.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his equalitarian view of God, Malcolm also understood Allah or God as a god who demands the oneness of man. Malcolm obviously understood himself as acting to prevent the breakdown of that oneness. Elmessiri writes on Malcolm's understanding of God and man:

. . . Personal interaction with Muslims enabled him to grasp the revolutionary implications of the Islamic concept of the oneness of God . . . to accept the oneness of God means to accept the oneness of man.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of God makes it evident that, for Malcolm Allah is the God for every man. Malcolm's God is concerned with realized justice and equality for all men. To be sure, Baldwin's statement makes evident Malcolm's reasons for denying the Christian God.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>George Breitman, (ed.) *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Elmessiri, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Everything that Malcolm understood of the Christian God made it plain that this God is the white man's God and that he works for the white man. An example of Malcolm's feelings about this has already been given in Chapter III of this study.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Malcolm would say with Baldwin, "We must get rid of this kind of God." This kind of God means nothing to oppressed Black people in America. Indeed, Malcolm understood the Christian God as the white man's God.

Malcolm's understanding of God served to give meaning and power to his life, even in the midst of oppression. At the same time, Malcolm made evident through his message that there was yet another idea which gave meaning to the oppressed, even in the midst of their oppressive conditions. Malcolm understood this idea as the capacity to retaliate. He saw this capacity to retaliate as a power which was beyond the control of the oppressor.

The actions of retaliation have meaning in and of themselves, because they are experienced as a powerful force which somehow grants man his self-respect, his personhood, his self-esteem, and, in a word, grants him his dignity.

To be sure, Malcolm's ideas about this capacity to retaliate were hope-inspiring. They were hope-inspiring to the oppressed, because retaliation has the power to destroy the "slave mind" which accepts and assents to everything. Retaliation also attempts to make right what others have made wrong. This power can provide meaning to the life of

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<sup>6</sup>Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 220.



the oppressed, because it is understood as that power which will finally win the victory.

In a real sense, the power inherent in the capacity to retaliate says something about man and God, especially when we perceive retaliation as a power beyond man's ability to control. Therefore, one might conclude that this power or force, since it transcends man, is God's activity in behalf of justice and in behalf of his desire for the oneness and equality of man. For Malcolm, this is already a reality, and because it is a reality, it gives hope for the future.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s view of God was based primarily on Christian tradition. As a product of the Black Christian religious experience in America, he had an understanding of God rooted in the Judaic tradition. To be sure, the Judaic tradition speaks of God in terms of his liberating activity. In his sermon, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," King gives a brilliant explanation of God's deliverance of the Israelites from the oppressive Egyptian bondage. In short, he describes how God caused the waters of the Red Sea to part, allowing the Israelites to get to the safety of the other shore. The well-known end of this story is that the Egyptians started through the parted waters and thereupon God caused the waters to come together, destroying the Egyptians. In his interpretation of this story, King says, " . . . this story symbolized the death of evil and the inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, King implies that he

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<sup>7</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 60.

understands God as a God of *justice*.

In another sermon King expresses some more of his understanding of God. In this sermon he views God as a duplicity. He views God as "tough minded" and "tender hearted."<sup>8</sup> He described this duplicity as follows:

I would not conclude without applying the meaning of the text to the nature of God. The greatness of our God lies in the fact that He is both tough minded and tender hearted. He has qualities, both of austerity and gentleness . . . God expresses His tough mindedness in His justice and wrath and His tender heartedness in His love and grace . . . On the one hand God is a God of justice who punished Israel for her wayward deeds and on the other hand, He is a forgiving father whose heart was filled with unutterable joy when the prodigal returned home.<sup>9</sup>

In this passage King makes it somewhat certain that he understands God as a God of justice, a God of love and a God of mercy. Thus, King would wish Baldwin to know that God does work in behalf of Black people, freeing them, giving them dignity and making them more loving. He would attempt to make this evident through his perception of the successes which were brought about by his non-violent campaign. He would say to Baldwin that "we have the experience of being free, we consider largeness as the new found dignity which we now realize, and we have made evident our ability to be more loving by our use of love as the regulating ideal of our non-violent movement." To be sure, King would not wish to get rid of God as he perceived Him.

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.

Along with King's understanding of God, he obviously came to realize a source of power and strength which, even in the midst of oppression, gave meaning to the struggle. For King, the power which gave meaning to the struggle was man's capacity to love. That is, King realized that there was a residue of power and a source of strength even in the face of the terribly oppressive conditions of Black Americans. That power, that source of strength, was realized by King as the capacity to love and to actualize this love through non-violent resistance and non-violent tactics.

For King, the capacity to love was a discovery within the struggle, which led to meaningful action. The capacity to love, as actualized through non-violence, made dignity a satisfying reality for Black people. The experience of dignity was seen by King as a positive value for the personhood of individual men. Therefore, he was certain that self-dignity and self-respect could be realized within the non-violent struggle.

Essentially, King was certain that the oppressed's demonstration of this overwhelming capacity to love was a power which was captivating to the oppressor, as well. In a real sense, he felt this capacity to love was a power that transcends man, in that it functions even where man attempts to resist it. Indeed, this presented Black people with a new reality--human dignity. It is this reality which gave hope to Black people--for dignity is a precious intangible which gives man a sense of self-esteem and a sense of manhood so crucial to human survival.

To be sure, this capacity to love, when realized as a force or

a power beyond man's fullest control, but within his capabilities, makes evident God's power in the world. I view this power as God's activity on behalf of man, seeking always to cast out evil and to make right what men have made wrong. Indeed, in this instance, God becomes a real part of the experience of oppressed people. Thus, they are given hope that this power which they experience, this power which provides meaning for their lives in the oppressive situation, will finally win the victory.

We have found that Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X functioned as liberators. We have found, as well, that they presented, and their messages still present, oppressed Black people with *hope* in their quest for liberation. To be sure, we have seen evidences of a kind of liberating activity functioning beyond man's capacity to control. We have identified this as God's activity or God's power in the world. If this be so, I merely wish to suggest that somehow the liberating activity of both Martin and Malcolm makes evident the real possibility of a theological synthesis which might be understood as a theology of liberation, or a liberating theology.

In view of the above conclusion, one might wish to argue that what I am really suggesting is nothing more than a theology of hope. Perhaps we can take our cue from Jürgen Moltmann, one of the foremost exponents of a theology of hope. His theology of hope views God, and, indeed, his activity, as "future." At the same time, it views God and his activity as "present."

In his *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, Moltmann talks about

God's activity as present and future. He says,

*God is present in the way in which his future takes control over the present in real anticipations and prefigurations. But God is not as yet present in the form of his eternal presence. The dialectic between his being and his being-not-yet is the pain and the power of history. Caught between the experiences of his presence and of his absence, we are seeking his future, which will solve this ambiguity that the present cannot solve. By future ("advent") we do not mean a far-away condition, but a power which already qualifies the present--through promise and hope, through liberation and the creation of new possibilities. As creator of new possibilities he liberates the present from the shackles of the past and from the anxious insistence on the status quo. Thus God becomes the power of the protest against the guilt that throws us into transiency and produces death, and he becomes also the ground of the freedom that renews life.*<sup>10</sup>

In this brief statement, Moltmann seems to understand God's activity in the world as a liberating activity which, in itself, is capable of freeing man.

To be sure, Malcolm X's understanding of the capacity to retaliate may be seen as a power which qualifies the present, giving hope to the future. Also, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of the capacity to love may be seen as a power which qualifies the present. Therefore, this power which qualifies the present thereby gives hope to the future.

Indeed, Moltmann desires that man understand God as the God of hope, who makes man's liberation an ever-actualizing reality. Insofar as God's liberating activity is meaningful to Malcolm and to Martin, and on the basis of Moltmann's reflections on hope, I submit that the

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<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 209.

Malcolm-and-Martin synthesis, to which I previously referred, becomes a liberating theology, or a theology of hope.

In a real sense, we must come to realize that hope makes the quest for liberation real. To be sure, without hope the oppressed man's quest for liberation would come to rest in a nightmare of hopelessness.

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